Underground

By: Suzume CA

"A girl only reveals herself in her full glory to the person she loves most in the whole world!" - A series of "reaction" stories written after each episode of Kill la Kill (beginning with 18), most of them immediately made irrelevant by the subsequent episode, but hey, we fic on. Ryumako, with an increasing presence of Satsuki as we go. Spoilers through the finale.

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Scissor-blade in hand, Ryūko lowered herself into the ruined basement of her former family home. After scanning the near-darkness for a few moments, she called up to the open hatch high above her. "It looks safe enough. Toss me the bag, Mako."

"Here you go, Ryūko-chan!" Mako called in reply, tossing their supplies down to be caught by Ryūko. She then quickly descended the rope while Ryūko set about positioning their electric lanterns to at least give the wreckage around them some shape and color.

Satsuki was the last to climb down into the cavernous space, after which she took a disdainful look around. "This is your family home, then?" she smirked. "Hmm, much has suddenly been made clear to me."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Ryūko snapped.

"Satsuki-sama, shame on you!" Mako admonished, waggling one finger at her former President. "I'm sure this was a beautiful place before Crazy Eyepatch Girl set everything on fire. You should be more sympathetic to your little sister!"

Satsuki's not inconsiderable eyebrows came together in a scowl, but she said nothing. Ryūko was about to laugh, but then Mako turned the waggling finger on her. "And as for *you*, Ryūko-chan, shame on *you* for taking that tone with your onee-chan! You two are sisters! You should be loving and respectful to one another, now more than ever!"

Ryūko bit back an acid response to the effect that there was still plenty of *bad* blood in that blood relation. Mako had been doing her best all along to keep the two of them from one another's throats, and Ryūko had to admit that they owed a lot to her friend's eternal optimism in the midst of this dire situation. She took a deep breath, then nodded. "I'll get the hatch closed," she said, looking around for the manual-close hand-crank.

"Are there any other entrances?" Satsuki asked, surveying the room.

"No," Ryūko grunted as she turned the heavy crank. "This should be a defensible position."

"Either that or we're voluntarily sitting in a trap," Satsuki frowned. "Our enemies are aware of this location. What makes you think they won't look for us here?"

"Because it's too obvious!" Mako piped up. "They'll be expecting us to be *much* more clever than to hide out in a place they know about, don't you think?"

"That's why we're only staying long enough to get some rest," Ryūko reminded Satsuki. "If we're going to go through with your four goons' crazy plan tomorrow, we're going to need to be at the top of our game."

"Very well," Satsuki allowed, holding out her hand. "I shall take the first watch, then. Your blade, Matoi?"

"Satsuki-sama…" Mako said in a warning tone.

The former President took a slow, stiff breath. "I shall require the scissor blade during my watch… *imōto-chan* ."

Ryūko tossed her the red blade, handle-first. "Mind that you're careful with it, Kiryuin."

"Ryūko-chan…" Mako said in the same voice.

For several long moments, Ryūko stared at her friend, but Mako had that determined look in her eyes again. She sighed in defeat. "Thank you for taking watch… *onee-chan* ."

Mako smiled brilliantly, then began unpacking their sparse bedding and laying it out in a relatively clean corner of the room, softly singing to herself as she worked. Satsuki gave Ryūko a long-suffering look, then with a swish of her long black hair, she stalked off to find a spot from which she could watch both the entrance and their campsite.

Ryūko watched her go, then went to help Mako with the preparations. To her surprise, her friend was already under her blanket and fast asleep. The previous days had given Ryūko cause to be extremely envious of Mako's ability to fall asleep at the drop of a hat. It was a useful skill to have at times like these.

Truth be told, as dangerous as things had been, Ryūko was deeply grateful that Mako had been with them during this time of exile. If not for her acting as the tireless buffer between them, this uneasy alliance between Ryūko and Satsuki would likely have come to blows time and again, sisters or not. Mako was not one to easily let go when it came to getting what she wanted, though, and she had been determined from the word go that she would bring these two together, damn the consequences.

Even Satsuki's resolve had been gradually worn down by the force of Hurricane Mako, though things had been dicey at first: Satsuki seemed very uncomfortable with physical affection for some reason, and with Mako being her normal touchy-feely self, Ryūko had more than once been given cause to worry that one of the younger girl's tackle-hugs would have led to bloodshed. Fortunately for them all, Mako had quickly learned to tone things down with their surly companion, and Satsuki had begun to grudgingly accept that Mako was only being Mako.

Ryūko pulled back her blanket and settled onto her thin bedroll, which was laid out next to Mako's. She had grown accustomed to

sleeping while wearing Senketsu, even if the suspenders sometimes made her uncomfortable. Better a little discomfort, though, if it meant she could synchronize at a moment's notice if necessary. After casting a look across the cavernous basement to see Satsuki still keeping watch, she dimmed the lantern slightly and settled down on her side, so that she was facing Mako. After taking a few deep breaths, she closed her eyes and tried to settle her tired mind.

"Ryūko-chan?" said Mako softly.

"Mako?" Ryūko whispered in reply. She opened her eyes to see that her friend was just as suddenly wide awake again, staring up at the distant ceiling.

"I was just thinking of how strange it all is," Mako mused. "All this time, it turns out clothes were the enemy all along."

"Well, clothes, along with that monster Kiryuin Ragyō," Ryūko muttered, trying not to think about the fact that this… *thing* was her mother… not to mention the other horrifying traits they had in common.

"We're going to win, right?" Mako asked.

"Of course we are," Ryūko told her, though the question caught her by surprise: normally Mako was not the one needing reassurance.

"Well, if *you* say we will, then we will," Mako smiled.

Ryūko smiled in return. "Go back to sleep, Mako."

"Ryūko-chan?"

"Hmm?"

"This basement is cold, isn't it?"

"C'mere, then," Ryūko chuckled, holding out one arm. On the few occasions they had been able to find sleep since going into hiding,

Ryūko had often awakened to find Mako snuggled up against her for warmth, but this was the first time she had been so blatant about it.

Mako smiled brilliantly and scooted under the covers until she could wrap her arms around Ryūko and lay her head on the taller girl's shoulder. Ryūko hugged Mako against herself for a moment, then froze as she felt something completely unexpected: the skin of Mako's bare back beneath her hands. Slowly and carefully, she slid her ungloved hand upward and then downward, but felt nothing but soft, warm skin.

It was the softest thing her hand had felt in recent memory: she was far more accustomed to the cold hilt of the scissor-blade, or the rough weave of Senketsu's life fibers. Even her own skin felt nothing like this: small wonder, considering the violence of her everyday life.

"Mako," she said carefully, "aren't you wearing your pajamas?"

"Nope," Mako said, snuggling more tightly against her. "Clothes are the enemy, remember?"

"Well, yeah, but…" Ryūko started, then chuckled. "What about all that stuff you said about how a girl only shows her full glory to the one she loves most in the world?"

Mako brought her face up and stared into Ryūko's eyes, a small, unreadable smile adorning her lips. For a long while, they just looked at one another, and then Mako gave a tiny giggle. "Ryūko-chan is very silly sometimes," she whispered, then settled back against her.

Ryūko felt her breath hitch in her chest as the implications hit. "M-Mako?" she gasped.

"It's okay, Ryūko-chan," Mako whispered, and while Ryūko could tell that she was still smiling, there was an uncharacteristic note of sadness in her voice. "I know that you and Senketsu belong to one another, and that's fine, but… being here, like this… I *am* with the one I love most in all the world, so I don't mind being naked."

"Mako…" Ryūko whispered, trying to wrap her mind around what she was hearing. Was Mako talking about… *her?*

Was Mako *in love with her?*

Not since their first day together had Ryūko doubted the odd girl's singular devotion to her, though at first she had found it unwelcome and more than a little bizarre. But then Mako had given her a home, and a family. Mako had fearlessly placed herself between Ryūko and a kamui-clad Satsuki in order to give her the final encouragement she needed to truly synchronize with Senketsu. Then, in yet another battle between Ryūko and Satsuki, Mako had again stepped into the heart of danger to come between them, this time to confront the berserk monster who had lost her mind and her way, and to bring Ryūko back at the risk of her own life.

Mako had stayed by her side during the war in Osaka, saying that being with her was the safest place of all. Mako had fearlessly followed Ryūko into the base of Nudist Beach, and had refused to be left behind when the time came to assault Honnouji Academy.

And every time, even knowing the danger, Ryūko had caved and allowed Mako to stay beside her, because she knew that as long as Mako was there, believing in her, she could not lose. Why, though? Why had the perpetual loner allowed this insane girl a place in her heart?

Her heart…

She felt a small hand slip under Senketsu and lay flat against her chest. "Ryūko-chan's heart is beating very fast," Mako whispered.

Suddenly remembering the terrible truth of what was inside that heart, Ryūko pulled herself away from Mako's arms, feeling a shock of cold as they broke contact. "Mako, don't," she whispered, but then she choked as she saw that in the process of squirming away, she had half pulled the blanket off of her friend, giving her an eyeful of the Full Glory Mako had alluded to.

Mako was… *beautiful* . Ryūko was so used to looking at other people as either potential opponents or things in need of protection that she had never quite noticed how truly *stunning* her friend was.

But then Ryūko saw the look of absolute devastation on that normally cheerful face, and her heart sank. "Mako, I'm sorry, I…"

"No, I'm the one who's sorry, Ryūko-chan," Mako said, giving her a pathetic attempt at a smile as she made an effort to cover herself. "I didn't mean to make you…"

"Mako, it's not that," Ryūko interrupted. "It's nothing you did, it's just that…" She felt her heart hammering against her ribs, and she hated it. "You need to… not get mixed up with me."

This time, Mako's smile was a little more genuine. "Isn't it kind of too late for *that*, Ryūko-chan?"

"What I mean is… you can't fall in love with me, Mako. You *can't* ."

"Is it because we're both girls?" Mako asked quietly.

The question blindsided Ryūko: honestly, that part of it had not even occurred to her. "No, it's not that either," she sighed. Suddenly aware that Satsuki might hear them if she spoke any louder, Ryūko again settled next to Mako and looked at her intently. "Mako, look at my eyes. I'm not even a human being: I'm a… a *thing* . I don't even *have* a real heart… just this ball of muscle and life fibers."

"I think Ryūko-chan has beautiful eyes," Mako said, an almost indignant tone creeping into her voice. "And Ryūko-chan is strong, and kind, and has a *gorgeous* body, and *of course* Ryuuko-chan has a heart."

"Not a *human* heart…" she began, but then she could no longer say anything at all, because Mako had silenced her by covering Ryūko's lips with her own.

For just a moment, the rest of the world went away - Satsuki, REVOCS, Nudist Beach, the war and its constant peril - and there was only Mako kissing her.

This was devotion.

This was *love* .

This was something she had been living without for so long that she had never realized just how badly she needed it.

And this insane girl was offering it up to her, monster that she was.

They broke, and Ryūko found that the smaller girl was somehow back in her arms again, and she again traced her fingers up and down the smooth skin of Mako's back. "I…" she whispered, but she could not piece together her thoughts sufficiently to say any more.

"When I had my goku uniform," Mako said quietly, "I nearly lost myself to these life fibers. But you didn't let me. You stood there and took my punches until I realized that the one I was fighting wasn't you at all."

"And then you returned the favor," Ryūko whispered. "When I was a monster, you fought to bring me back."

"Maybe, but you're the one who showed me that it could be done," said Mako. "You've beaten these life fibers before, and with your help, so did I. So I'm not afraid of them, Ryūko-chan, and I'm not afraid of you either, because you're strong enough to be *you*, even with these things inside you."

Mako then broke away from Ryūko slightly, took the other girl's ungloved hand, and placed it against her bare chest. "And if you ever feel like you need a human heart… you'll always have this one."

Ryūko once again felt as though the world were slipping away, leaving only the feel of Mako's skin and the endless depths of her

eyes. They once again had taken on that familiar determined look, but there was something much, much more.

"I love you, Ryūko," Mako whispered, her lips curling into an easy smile. "Whatever else happens, remember that."

Through all the doubts regarding herself, her ongoing conflict and her future, Ryūko felt a simple truth shining through: if Mako believed in her, maybe she could find it in her heart - whatever that heart was - to do the same.

She also realized that she never wanted a day to go by without that smile in her life. So she kissed it again for good measure.

Several long, breathless moments later, they slowly settled back to lie against the too-thin bedrolls, but with their arms still around one another, it hardly seemed to matter.

Still… "Mako?"

"Hmm?"

"We really should get some sleep, shouldn't we?"

"Probably so," Mako sighed.

There was a lengthy silence, and Ryūko felt her pulse returning to normal. In the end, Mako had always been the one person capable of instilling a sense of peace within her… even after all that.

"Ryuuko-chan?" Mako asked quietly.

"Yes, Mako?"

"Do you… want me to put my pajamas on?"

Ryūko chuckled at the almost plaintive tone in Mako's voice. "Nah, I think I kind of like your Full Glory," she smiled. "Tell you what. After

we win this little war, let's you and I go off somewhere that we can go Full Glory together, and… see what happens after that."

Mako looked up at her for a moment, eyes shining, then snuggled even more tightly against her. "I like that idea, Ryūko-chan."

"Me too."

From across the wide space, Satsuki watched the proceedings from the corner of her eye. She had caught every word, of course: it was obvious that neither of those two knew anything at all about subtlety.

At least now, though, they appeared to be settling down, so she would not have to intervene and demand that they sleep. Honestly, if they had gone on even a minute longer…

… well, perhaps five minutes longer, but no more than that. They had a war to win, and she needed her allies, tenuous as their bond was, to be rested and at their best.

Satsuki smiled to herself, but it was *most certainly* about the prospect of their forthcoming victory, and nothing more.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Happy Valentine's Day, all! I'm sure this story will be completely invalidated by next week, but I'm fine with that. These characters have just been eating my brain too much for me to not do something about it.

BELATED AUTHOR'S NOTE: For those coming to the party late, this was originally going to be a one-shot, but then somewhere along the line it became an exercise in writing a "response" to each new episode of Kill la Kill. As a consequence, none of the forthcoming chapters are connected, per se: they are individual stories rather than a continuing narrative. I shall endeavor to not be hopelessly repetitive in the successive confessions and first kisses. ^^

Episode 19

Underground (Episode 19 edition)

by Suzume CA

Dressed only in her underthings and still wrapped in the blanket she had awakened under, Ryūko sat staring out across the river at the wasteland that Osaka had become. Although she knew now that it had been a month since the assault on Honnouji Academy, to her it felt as though it had been just last night that she had sat here last, wondering when her life's focus had stopped being a relatively simple quest to find answers about her father's murder, and had instead become a life-or-death struggle to save the world from alien invaders.

Then again, even that night had been simplicity itself. At least then she had known who and what she was, or at least she *thought* she had. Now, though?

"Ryūko-chan?"

She closed her eyes at the sound of that familiar voice. Not now. She couldn't deal with this now.

In spite of her mental protests, though, like the unstoppable force of nature that she was, Mako approached her, making little wincing noises with each barefoot step over the rough terrain. She was "dressed" only in the Nudist Beach all-purpose utility belt, which she made an effort to adjust in such a way that she could keep it beneath her as she settled to sit at Ryūko's side.

She then asked the very question that Ryūko knew that she would: "Are you okay, Ryūko-chan?"

"Go away, Mako," she growled.

"Are you angry at me, Ryūko-chan?" Mako asked quietly.

"No," Ryūko sighed. "But I might be if you don't go away."

"Ryūko-chan…" Mako said in a voice that was somewhere between reproachful and heartbroken.

"Look, I just don't want to hear it, okay?" Ryūko snapped. "I already know why you're here. You're going to try to convince me to wear Senketsu again. You're going to try to convince me to keep fighting. I don't need one of your crazy inspirational speeches right now, Mako; I just want to be *left the hell alone!* "

"Too bad," Mako replied.

Ryūko turned shocked eyes on Mako, and that shock only intensified when she saw the look on the other girl's face.

Mako was *angry* . It wasn't a look of sheer unbridled fury, nor was it a sneer of disdain, but there was no mistaking that Mako was upset. With *her* . Probably for the first time ever.

"Haven't I been telling you all along, Ryūko-chan?" Mako said then, and the gentle tone of her voice was at odds with that fiery look. "I'll *always* be at your side."

Ryūko looked away. Even though she knew that it was futile to try to argue with Mako once she had her mind set on something, she still tried. "You don't want to be around me."

"Silly Ryūko-chan. I think I'd know that better than you." Her voice then became a bit constricted, and she was obviously fighting to keep it level as she spoke. "If Ryūko-chan doesn't want to be around *me* anymore, I'll go away, but I'll never stop looking out for you, even if I have to do it from somewhere else."

Silence stretched out between them. It would be so easy to just tell her to go away, and Ryūko found herself desperately wanting to do

so, but… she couldn't say it to Mako's face. She just couldn't bring herself to flat-out dismiss this crazy girl.

So instead, she tried a different way. "You seem to be fitting in pretty well here," Ryūko commented, looking the other girl up and down. She quickly felt the heat rising to her cheeks, though: this was far more of Mako than she was accustomed to seeing. "I guess you decided you were ready to go full-nude after all?"

"Not by choice," Mako frowned. "But I don't have my uniform anymore, so it's this or nothing, I guess."

Ryūko gave a single snort of laughter, though she did find herself wondering what had happened to Mako's uniform. "I hear Gamagōri has a crush on you."

"Huh?" Mako said, blinking at Ryūko in surprise.

"You know. He's sweet on you. He *likes* you. I heard Jakuzure teasing him about it." She tried to give Mako a knowing smile, even though she felt clenched-up inside as she said this.

Mako's surprised expression continued for at least ten seconds, then turned into one of shock and horror. "Ehhh?! But- but- if Gamagōri-senpai and I were to do sexy things, he really *would* crush me!"

The clenching feeling intensified at the thought of seeing Mako and Gamagōri as a couple, but it was probably only because Gamagōri had been an enemy for so long. It had to be that. "Maybe you should take him up on it," Ryūko suggested, though the words left a bad taste in her mouth. "He's kind of a brute, but he's honorable, and…"

"And what?" Mako asked after Ryūko trailed off.

"At least… he's *human*," Ryūko grated.

"I'm not so sure about that, Ryūko-chan," Mako said in all seriousness. "He never seems to be the same size from one

moment to the next. What would happen if he were doing sexy things with a girl, and…" Mako's eyes bugged, and she crossed her legs tightly: she looked as though her imagination had just taken her someplace very unpleasant. "And… anyway," she went on in a small, distant voice, "you should only do sexy things with the person you love most, and I don't love Gamagōri-senpai more than I love Ryūko-chan."

Ryūko whipped her head around to stare wide-eyed at the other girl, and Mako's face immediately flushed. "Ehh! Th-that doesn't mean I want to do sexy things with Ryūko-chan!" With those words said, though, the look of horror intensified. "Th-that doesn't mean that I *don't* want to do sexy things with Ryūko-chan either! I mean, I think I *kind of* do, but I wasn't supposed to *tell* you that, and, and, and..!"

" *Mako!"* Ryūko shouted at her, instinctively reaching out to grab the other girl's shoulders. "Calm down!"

Still blushing all the way down to her chest, her face a mask of mortification, Mako nodded and bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Ryūko-chan."

Throughout the conversation, Ryūko had felt as though parts of her were at war with one another. Right now, one of those parts was singing for joy at the accidental confession she'd just received, but that part of her was currently not in control of her voice. "This is exactly what I'm talking about, though. Haven't you been paying attention, Mako? I'm a life-fiber monster!"

"No you're not," Mako frowned.

"Mako, someone *pulled my heart out of my chest*, and these life fibers just sucked it right back in like it was nothing! I'm. A. *Monster* ."

"Well, I don't care!" Mako shouted. "Besides, if you were *really* a monster, you would have killed me!"

Ryūko gasped at the thought. "What are you talking about?"

"When you were fighting with the Crazy Eyepatch Girl, and you…" Mako swallowed hard, "lost yourself, you kept trying to push me away, but I wouldn't let you."

"Classic Mako," Ryūko sighed. "I don't really remember much of what happened, though… I wasn't myself anymore." The only clear image she had was of a burned, tearful Mako looking down at her, terrified of having already lost her.

"Exactly!" Mako insisted, seizing on this point. "Even though you weren't yourself, all you did was try to pull me off of you. A *monster* would have just squished me like a bug and kept fighting with Satsuki-sama, don't you think?"

Ryūko looked out across the river, desperately wishing that Mako would stop making so much sense. "Maybe," she admitted.

"Besides," Mako said next, and Ryūko could hear the shudder in her voice, "I know what monsters are now, and they're not like you at all."

"What?" Ryūko asked, once again looking at Mako, whose face had gone distant and pale. "What do you mean? What monsters?"

"The COVERs," Mako said, her voice as serious as Ryūko had ever heard it. "Didn't you know, Ryūko-chan?"

"About the COVERs? Yeah, I hacked a bunch of them down, remember? What does that have to do with you, Ma..?" She broke off mid-word as the realization hit, and she felt a sudden swell of terror inside.

And then Mako confirmed that fear with her next words. "I spent the last month inside one of those things."

"They… they took you?" Ryūko whispered. "When?"

"Back at the stadium, when they first appeared. Dad and Mataro and Guts and even Gamagōri-senpai tried to save me, but…"

"I didn't…" Ryūko stammered, "didn't… see? *I* didn't try to save you?"

"It's okay, Ryūko-chan," Mako smiled faintly. "You were kind of busy at the time, what with getting your heart pulled out and everything. Anyway, it all worked out in the end. Gamagōri-senpai got me out, even though I guess the stupid thing had already eaten my uniform." She frowned in annoyance. "That was my only one, too."

Ryūko continued staring at Mako, trying to come to grips with the fact that one of those things had… *eaten* her, and Ryūko hadn't even known. She realized uncomfortably that she needed to thank Gamagōri, while at the same time she found herself hating him for having been there for Mako when she had not.

Mako's next words made that feeling even worse. "I was kind of surprised when it was Gamagōri-senpai who saved me." She looked away, part of her earlier blush returning. "I… kind of hoped it would have been you." She then gave Ryūko a slightly dimmer version of her typical smile. "But Mom tells me you spent the whole month unconscious and having nightmares, so I guess you were in a bad place too. I'm glad you're better now."

"What… what was it like?" Ryūko asked, still stunned.

"It was… dark," Mako said quietly, looking away from Ryūko. "And… have you ever gotten a paper cut? You know how they sting? That was what the life fibers felt like: it was like hundreds and hundreds of little cuts, even though they weren't actually cutting my skin. And… everywhere they cut me, I could feel them taking a little bit of me away. It hurt so much sometimes that I thought I'd pass out, but… they wouldn't let me. I think they need us to be awake while they're… feeding."

"How did you… get through it?" Ryūko whispered, fighting back the urge to be sick.

"Well… first I tried to go to my Special Place," Mako said with a tiny smile. "That's where all my friends are… the friends I had before I met you, that is. That was where I always used to go whenever I was being punished at school, or on those nights that there wasn't much to eat, or… you know, just when I felt lonely."

Even knowing first-hand now what her heart was, Ryūko felt it breaking at this description of what Mako had been forced to endure in her life. "Did that help?"

"Not very much at first," Mako sighed. "My friends were scared too. They wanted to help me, but… I wanted to protect them, too. I don't know why, but I feel like the life fibers would have taken them away from me. I think that's what they do: they take away the things that are important to us. They take away who we are."

Ryūko closed her eyes and bit her tongue to keep herself from speaking. Was this what *she* was, as well?

"But then…" Mako went on, and there was a tentative warmth in her voice like the first rays of the sunrise. "Then, something amazing happened, and I knew everything was going to be okay."

"What happened?" Ryūko choked out.

Mako turned to her and smiled, and this time it was a true Mako smile. "You came to save me."

"But… I didn't!" Ryūko protested. "You said it yourself; it was Gamagōri who saved you!"

"Well, yeah, *later* he did, but this was *before* that," Mako giggled. "I was there in my Special Place, trying to hide all of my friends from the life fibers, and then… *you* appeared. You were *amazing*, Ryūko-chan. When the life fibers came for us, you fought them off, and then you'd hug me, and I felt like the ones inside *you* were giving back everything the bad ones took from me. That was when I

remembered, Ryūko-chan: next to you is the safest place there is. And that was also when I figured out what's so special about you."

Ryūko forced herself to meet Mako's eyes, but she found that her own sight was beginning to blur with unshed tears. "What?" she managed.

"You may have life fibers inside you," Mako told her, "but they don't take life away from people: they *give it back* . Don't you see, Ryūko-chan? *That's* why you're not a monster. You're exactly the *opposite* of those things. So… even before Gamagōri-senpai pulled me out of the COVER, you had *already* saved me."

She wanted to argue with Mako, and tell her that it wasn't true: that Mako's own strength was what had kept her alive through a month of torture. She wanted to refute the ridiculous idea that she was any sort of hero, or anything other than the freak her parents had made of her. She wanted to tell Mako that she was no better than the monsters trying to take over the world.

But she also knew that even this wouldn't make Mako stop believing in her, and it truly *was* that faith in Ryūko that had kept Mako alive. Even though she had not been there to cut Mako out of that creature herself, just by being the Ryūko that Mako saw in her, she had already saved her friend.

Could she ever be that Ryūko again now, knowing what she knew?

It was too much.

And so, as much as she wanted to scream and rage, in the end all she could do was cry. Mako made to pull her friend to her, but accidentally conked Ryūko's head against the hard cross-strap of her Nudist Beach regalia. With a hurried apology, Mako quickly divested herself of the harness and pulled Ryūko's sobbing face against her chest. "It's okay, Ryūko-chan," Mako whispered, stroking the other girl's hair. "You can let it out. You're safe here too."

Ryūko almost laughed in spite of the fact that her tears were now coming in torrents. Maybe Mako was right: maybe Ryūko's safest place in the world was *also* right here by Mako's side. That was the last coherent thought she had, though, before her mind just shut down for a while, leaving her only with the sensation of Mako's arms around her, of Mako's fingers gently petting her hair, of the warmth and softness of Mako against her. " *I'm not letting go,"* she heard above the noise inside her, and she could not tell whether this were Mako's actual voice or simply the memory of it, but at that moment it simply didn't matter.

When at last she had cried herself out, Ryūko found herself reluctant to leave this warm cocoon, and she realized that Mako had pulled the blanket around them both. Still, she was quickly coming to realize that her face had come to rest right between Mako's breasts, and suddenly mindful of the earlier flustered talk of "sexy things," she thought it best to move. Plenty of time for that later, under better circumstances than this… and where exactly had *that* thought come from?

Instead, she slipped her arms around Mako's back to return the hug, and rested her head on the other girl's shoulder. "Sorry."

"Don't be. Now, do you think that a *real* monster could cry like that?"

"Okay, okay," Ryūko said in a broken whisper. "How is it that you always know how to save me, too?"

"I learned it from the best," Mako giggled.

"Thank you, Mako."

"Anything for my Ryūko-chan," Mako whispered in reply, still stroking Ryūko's hair.

They sat like that for a long while, and when Mako next spoke, there was a hint of nervousness in her voice. "Ryūko-chan, there was

something else I came up here to ask you about, and… it was about Senketsu after all. Not to convince you to wear him, though!"

"What is it, then?"

"Well… you see, I still can't talk to him… or at least, he can't talk back to me, but… I felt like I should ask your permission before I ask him what I want to ask him."

"Mako… what *are* you talking about?"

"I… want your permission to wear Senketsu," Mako said hurriedly.

Ryūko's eyes snapped open, and she broke away from Mako sufficiently to meet the other girl's nervous but determined expression. "You… you what?!"

"I want to wear Senketsu," Mako said again, and then the words tumbled out, making Ryūko wonder how long Mako had been struggling with saying this. "I know all this fighting has been hard for you, Ryūko-chan, and I'm sure you're tired of it, so… I thought maybe that if I wore Senketsu for a while, it would give you a chance to rest, and I could do the fighting *for* you for a little while, and…"

"Mako, you *can't!* " Ryūko interrupted her. "He'd eat you alive!"

"He would not!" Mako said, looking aghast at the idea. "Senketsu is our friend! I mean, he's *your* friend, but if he's your friend then he's my friend too, and I know he wouldn't try to hurt me!"

"He might not be able to help it, though!" Ryūko argued. "Dammit, Mako, I was *built* to wear him! You're still human, and I'm… not!"

"Senketsu isn't any more a monster than you are," Mako said gravely. "And besides, Ryūko-chan, if I could survive a month inside a *real* monster who *really was* trying to eat me alive, then I can survive wearing Senketsu." Her face then brightened. "It'll be like

those remake movies, where Rei was determined to stop the angels so that Shinji wouldn't have to fight anymore!"

"Uh… didn't Rei *die* in that movie?"

"… Sort of? Maybe? But she had clones, and..!"

Ryūko impulsively pulled Mako's face closer to hers and kissed her on the forehead. "Maybe, but there's only one Mako, and I'm not willing to risk you." She then did her best to smile at this crazy girl. Somehow the knowledge that Mako really would do this for her had flipped a switch inside Ryūko, and she knew what she needed to do.

"But… Ryūko-chan..?" Mako whispered.

"It's about time I apologized to Senketsu anyway," Ryūko grimaced. "I… said some hurtful things, and at the very least I owe him the ironing of his life."

Mako's eyes widened, then began to quickly fill with tears. "You mean..?"

"Yeah," Ryūko nodded. "I can't sit here feeling sorry for myself and let that bitch Ragyō win. If other people are suffering the way you were, then someone needs to put a stop to it. Might as well be me."

With a squeal that was at least part sob, Mako again tightened her arms around Ryūko. "I know you can do it, Ryūko-chan! As long as the two of you work together, you can do anything!"

"Hey, who's talking about the *two* of us?" Ryūko smirked. "You'll be there too, won't you?"

"You *bet* I will!"

Ryūko could not help but smile at Mako's enthusiasm. "You know, you said something earlier about how I was the one giving life back to you. I still think you've got it backwards, though."

Mako broke slightly from their embrace, but only enough so that she could bring her forehead to rest against Ryūko's. "You really don't have any idea, do you?"

"Of what?"

"Of how much you've given me," Mako smiled. "I never want to go back to who I was before I met you, Ryūko-chan. Not ever."

Then, to Ryūko's shock, Mako tipped her face just enough to place a tiny, warm kiss on Ryūko's lips.

"Mako…" Ryūko whispered.

"Come on," Mako smiled, though Ryūko could see the hints of a blush coming back to her cheeks. "You've got a friend back at the base who needs you."

She stood and offered her hand, which Ryūko took in her own. Then, blanket still draped over their shoulders, they made their way back to the base hand in hand. There was a lot of danger yet to face, but as long as she had her new safest place, Ryūko knew that she would endure.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: And another one-shot refuses to be a one-shot. Who knows? Maybe at this point I'll just keep desperately writing new stories about these girls after each episode. There are worse ways to be inspired. Thank you all for reading!

Episode 20

(Episode 20 edition)

With slow, heavy steps, Mako returned below decks and found her way back to the ship's infirmary, where the rest of her family was still hard at work setting up the facility to befit a proper back-alley doctor. More accurately, her father and mother were hard at work while Mataro was busily playing with Guts, but at least they were all keeping busy.

Rather than interrupt them, Mako made her way to where a drooping mass of black and red fabric was leaning back against one of the bulkheads. Upon her approach, Senketsu looked up at her, and Mako was certain she could see hope in the single eye formed by his scarf.

"I'm sorry, Senketsu-chan," she said quietly as she knelt next to the *kamui* . "They were able to rescue Satsuki-sama, but they weren't able to bring back Ryūko-chan. She's still there at the school."

Senketsu deflated slightly, so Mako put her arm around his collar and pulled him into a sideways hug. "I'm sure she's okay, Senketsu-chan. They'll get her back next time, and then Ryūko-chan will remember how much she needs you, and there'll be a big happy reunion before beating up the bad guys." She gave a crisp nod and smiled at her own assurance.

The alien *seifuku* turned toward her, then hopped into Mako's lap and gave her a hug, wrapping his empty sleeves around her shoulders. Mako hugged him back, patting him softly. It was kind of neat the way Senketsu had become more and more alive the longer she had known him. Early on, it had appeared that Ryūko was merely talking to an inanimate object on a hanger, but now he was a living, moving creature as much as a uniform. Mako liked to think

that maybe he was more comfortable being part of the family now, or perhaps some of Ryūko's humanity had rubbed off on him.

This thought brought a frown to Mako's face, though, as Ryūko had left them after saying that she was not a human being at all: that she was not the Ryūko that Mako had known. If only Mako could see her again to tell her otherwise…

Senketsu turned as though to hop down, but Mako pulled him back into her lap and hugged him, his back to her chest. She then brought her hand up to scratch him behind the collar. The *kamui* went stiff for a moment, then seemed to melt a little in her arms, and rubbed against the hand that was massaging him.

Mako giggled. "Senketsu-chan, you're like a cat."

The single eye now looked a bit reproachful. "That's a good thing, Senketsu-chan!" Mako insisted. "Cats are lovely and soft and care for the people who care for them and feed them, and…" Her eyes suddenly went wide. "Feed them! Oh my gosh, Senketsu-chan, you haven't been worn for a month! You must be starving!"

Mako studied the *kamui* in her lap intently, but noticed no significant change of expression. "Um… would you like me to put you on, Senketsu-chan?" Mako ventured. "You can have some of *my* blood if you want."

Senketsu reached up with one of his sleeves to pat Mako on the shoulder, which she presumed to be his way of saying "That's okay." She frowned slightly. "It's fine, Senketsu-chan. It's not like I'm doing anything useful right now anyway. Do you want to just have some of my blood without me putting you on?" She held her upper arm to his "mouth" to offer him a bite.

For a moment, the fabric eye took on that watery look, as though Senketsu were about to cry. He then very slowly closed the gap between shirt and skirt over Mako's arm and pressed down. He did not draw blood, however: just gently and warmly held onto her arm.

"Aww, Senketsu-chan is very sweet," Mako smiled, using her free hand to once again scratch him behind the collar. "Thanks for letting me take care of you while Ryūko-chan is away. It's a shame I can't hear you."

There was a wiggle against her arm that felt like a nod. Mako's smile grew a bit more thoughtful. "But you know what, Senketsu-chan? I meant what I said before. Even though I can't hear you, I'm beginning to think I can kind of *feel* you. We've got a lot in common, after all: Ryūko-chan is the one you and I love most, so I'm sure you're thinking a lot of the things I'm thinking right now."

She hugged Senketsu more tightly against her, wishing that Ryūko were there wearing him. "You're worried that she's gone into danger and left you behind. You're worried that you can't be there for her when she needs you most, even if she doesn't realize that she needs you." A darker thought followed: one that Mako normally would not give voice, but which she felt safe telling to Senketsu. "Or… you're afraid that maybe she doesn't really need you after all…"

The pressure on her arm increased, but in a reassuring way, and Mako made an effort to brighten. "That one's probably more me than you, though. *Of course* Ryūko-chan needs *you*, Senketsu-chan! You two are a perfect team." She paused, still feeling an uncomfortable, unwelcome sadness beneath the surface. "I envy you, Senketsu-chan. You can actually *protect* Ryūko-chan. I can cheer for her, and I can believe in her… but I can't keep people from hurting her. I can't be her armor, like you."

She was beginning to cry a little, and to her surprise, Senketsu reached up to wipe away her tears with the end of his sleeve. "Aww, thanks, Senketsu-chan," she whispered, hugging him tighter still and making an effort to smile. "You're a sweetheart."

He patted her shoulder with the dampened end of his sleeve, and Mako giggled at the gesture. "I really do envy you, though," she went on. "Ryūko-chan gets to *wear* you. I wonder what it would feel like to

be worn by someone? Is it like hugging them all the time? Or is it more like really *holding* them with your entire body, and touching them all over… It would be *so* wonderful to be able to hold Ryūko-chan like that… and to have her… inside…" She trailed off, feeling her thoughts go hazy at the possibilities, but then she suddenly remembered that while *she* could not hear Senketsu, *Ryūko-chan* certainly could. "Um… could you maybe not tell Ryūko-chan that I said that part?"

Senketsu did not move for quite some time, but then he again gave her two quick pats on the shoulder with his sleeve.

Quite suddenly, there was a tremendous crashing noise, and the room lurched around them, sending everyone sprawling to the floor. Mako twisted in midair to keep herself from squishing Senketsu when she landed. "What was that?!" she cried.

"It felt like the ship hit something!" her father exclaimed.

Mataro had already rushed to one of the portholes and stuck his head out. "No, I think something hit *us!* " he then said over his shoulder.

Four humans and a kamui immediately crowded the portholes to look out at the main deck of the ship, where something had left a smoking crater in the metal surface. As the air cleared, Mako felt her heart jump as she recognized the human figure standing at the center of that crater, red scissor-blade in hand.

"Ryūko-chan!" she gasped, feeling a surge of hope, but then she saw the scissor blade sweep in a wide arc, sending a shockwave that knocked two of the Nudist Beach helicopters into the ocean. Ryūko had indeed returned to them, but as an enemy.

That was when Mako noticed what Ryūko was wearing: it looked different on her than it had on Satsuki-sama, but there was no mistaking its two malevolent eyes. "Ehhh?! How come Ryūko-chan is

wearing Junketsu?!" she cried. That was impossible! Ryūko belonged with Senketsu, not some other *kamui* !

At that moment, the door to the infirmary opened behind them, and Mako heard an imperious voice call out. "I'm coming in."

Mako tore herself from the porthole and looked back to see the stern face of her school president. She was still dressed only in a cloak and boots, as she had been when they had brought her aboard the ship, but now she carried a sword in each hand. "Satsuki-sama..!" Mako said in a small, surprised voice.

"Mankanshoku," Satsuki addressed her. "I am in need of Matoi's *kamui* . I am told that you have been its custodian in her absence."

The shock that she was actually *being addressed by Satsuki* was itself enough to make Mako's head spin, never mind the strange choice of words: what did cleaning bathrooms have to do with taking care of Senketsu. "Um..?" she ventured.

"You are the *kamui's* guardian, yes?" Satsuki went on. "I require its immediate aid."

"I'm… I'm Senketsu-chan's friend," Mako nodded.

"As you like," Satsuki said impatiently. "Mankanshoku, I require that you give me the *kamui* immediately."

Mako was flabbergasted at the request, and looked down at Senketsu, who had hopped up to stand beside her. "But… he's not mine to give to you!" she squeaked.

Satsuki tightened her lips, and when she spoke next, it was in a quiet, dangerous tone. "Mankanshoku, surely you have seen what is happening outside at this moment. If I do not stop Matoi, she will tear this ship apart, along with everyone on it. I know what Junketsu is like, and I fear that he has already taken control of her, body and soul. She will not be swayed by your words of devotion this time,

Mankanshoku. Junketsu must be stripped from her, but I cannot do it alone. I. Need. The. *Kamui* ."

"I…" Mako started to say, but then she came to the most shocking realization yet: even though the words sounded like a demand, Satsuki-sama was actually *asking for Mako's permission* . As dire as the situation was, and as justified as she would be in simply grabbing Senketsu and leaving, she was instead asking leave of the one closest to him.

Still, Mako stood by her conviction that this permission was not hers to give. She straightened her shoulders, then looked from Satsuki to the uniform at her side. "Senketsu-chan," she asked, "do you want to go with her to save Ryūko-chan?"

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of Ryūko fighting someone outside. All eyes in the room were now locked on Senketsu.

Finally, after looking up at Mako and giving her what looked for all the world like a bow, Senketsu leaped across the short space between himself and Satsuki, allowing her to catch him with one arm.

Wasting no time, Satsuki set down her blades and threw off her cloak, seemingly unconcerned about the fact that she was now standing naked (save for her boots) before the family of a zero-star student. Mako heard both her father and her brother make a brief choking sound before her mother put them both in sleeper holds.

Satsuki separated Senketsu and began to pull on the skirt. She then paused for a moment and looked at Mako. "What?" she said simply.

"Oh, um," Mako stammered, realizing that she had been staring. Perhaps she had been wrong about Ryūko-chan's being bigger after all. "Sorry, Satsuki-sama," she said lamely, hoping that her nose hadn't started bleeding. "I was just, um, noticing the family

resemblance. Um, Satsuki-sama, you *will* try to save Ryūko-chan, right?"

"It may not be possible," Satsuki said grimly, bringing the uniform top over her head and then pulling her long hair up through the collar. "She may already be lost to Junketsu."

"But… you'll try, right?" Mako asked again. "Please, Satsuki-sama? Ryūko-chan, she's…" She broke off, feeling herself nearly choking on the words. "I love her very much, Satsuki-sama. She's everything to me."

Satsuki picked up her swords and turned to go, but before she reached the door, she looked back and met Mako's eyes again. "Mankanshoku," she said in a soft, firm voice, "I have lived my life mourning the death of a sister I never knew." Her eyes flashed visibly. "Having found her at last, I have no desire to mourn her again."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Rather than speculating about future events this time (kind of a useless thing to do with this show, come right down to it), I thought maybe I'd try telling a story of a "background" event that may have happened after all. Thank you, as always, for reading, and please don't be shy about telling me what you think!

Episode 21

(Episode 21 edition)

Ryūko awoke feeling as though she had been hit by a truck, which had then backed over her several times, leaked fuel on her and lit her on fire for good measure.

She opened her eyes, but the room was dark and blurry and kind of spinning around her. She was on a cot of some kind, and she realized that this was the second time in a row that she had awakened in a sick bed with someone watching over her.

With that memory, however, came a chaotic jumble of images that caused her already aching head to suddenly feel like it was about to split open from the pressure. The torrent of mental pictures was dominated by one, however: a pair of brown eyes widened in shock and horror.

"Mako..?" she called out weakly, looking at the figure seated beside her bed, desperately hoping that it was her, and that her greatest fear had not in fact come to pass.

"Ah, you're awake," said a much different voice. "Welcome back, Matoi."

Ryūko's eyes gradually focused, allowing her to discern details of her bedside visitor. Long hair, sharp features, unmistakable eyebrows. "Satsuki," she whispered. "Where's Mako?"

"I sent her out to get some air," Satsuki replied. "She never left your side, from the moment you collapsed. I daresay she has not yet even blinked. Even then, she only consented to leave the room knowing that Senketsu would be watching you in her absence." She pointed

to the other side of the bed, where the *kamui* was hanging within reach.

"Senketsu," she sighed with relief. "Are… are you okay?" There was much more that she knew she needed to say to him, but this was all she could manage for now.

Weary, Senketsu answered her, ***but very glad to see you awake.***

Ryūko slowly sat up and rubbed her hands over her face for a moment. As the blanket fell away, she realized that she was naked, but she couldn't bring herself to care, especially since Satsuki herself was not much more dressed than she, wearing only Nudist Beach utility belts. "How did I get here?" she asked.

"You fainted from blood loss moments after you freed yourself of Junketsu," Satsuki answered. "You were brought here, where you were cleaned by Mankanshoku Sukuyo and given a blood transfusion by Mankanshoku Barazo." She made a scornful face. "His methods were crude, but effective and properly sterile, so I allowed it."

"Allowed it," Ryūko snorted. Somehow, Satsuki always had to be in charge. "Where did he get the blood?"

"From myself and Mankanshoku Mako," Satsuki informed her. "You and I share the same blood type, and Mankanshoku-kun is of the very rare O-negative type, making her a universal donor. Neither of us had much to spare, but I daresay we were better off than you."

Ryūko raised a hand to her chest. She had Satsuki's blood inside her now? And Mako's?

The image of Mako's terrified face returned, along with a slowly dawning dread within herself. "Wait… what happened to Mako?" she asked slowly. "Why didn't she have much blood to spare?"

"I daresay she lost some while wearing Senketsu," Satsuki went on, "even though she did not synchronize with him. That is, unless something else happened while they were inside you."

The memory was growing clearer now. Mako staring at her with wide eyes, her lips trembling, as a fountain of blood gushed from a wound delivered by the scissor-blade, though Ryūko could not tell whether the blood came from Mako herself or the *kamui* that had been protecting her…

Protecting her… from Ryūko herself, who had delivered the stroke with the red half of the Rending Scissors.

"What do you mean," Ryūko whispered, "by inside me?" *Please let it have been a dream, please let it have been a dream…*

Satsuki folded her arms. "My plan was to give you a wound, and thus allow Senketsu contact with your blood, in an attempt to sever the life fibers binding you to Junketsu. Instead, he was literally pulled into the wound, followed seconds later by Mankanshoku herself. They were expelled shortly thereafter, by which time you appeared to have come to your senses. No one is quite certain what happened, but yes, it appears that they were literally inside your body for a short time. Mankanshoku refuses to tell anyone what happened during that time, but she seemed somewhat traumatized by the experience."

"That was… really you?" Ryūko whispered, looking up at Senketsu. "And… Mako too? In the church?"

Yes, Ryūko, Senketsu said gently. ***We came to bring you back.***

Ryūko saw the church doors flung open, revealing Mako, dressed in Senketsu. "Ryūko-chan! We're here to bring you home!"

Her hand closed around the grip of the scissor blade, and she brought it to bear against the intruders. "I'll kill anyone who ruins my happiness," she growled.

But then Mako was beside her, as though summoned to the spot. "This isn't happiness, not even close!" Mako said insistently. "This isn't you, Ryūko-chan!"

" *Shut your mouth!" Ryūko snarled, slamming the girl with the handle of the scissor, but Mako immediately leaped upon her, burying Ryūko's face in her chest, so that Senketsu's eye was even with hers.*

Snap out of it, Ryūko!

" *Shut up!" she shouted back at the kamui, again throwing them off of her, but Mako would have none of that, again springing forward to cling to her.*

" *Baka, baka, baka!" Mako shrieked against her. She then took a step back and looked at Ryūko with desperation in her eyes. "Fine, go ahead and kill me! If you're so intent on staying cooped up in here, kill me and give up on being my Ryūko!"*

There was a pause, no more than a second or two, and then Ryūko brought the scissor blade down. And then there was only blood, and terrified eyes staring into her own…

Ryūko gasped as the remainder of the memory snapped into place, and she clutched at the place on her chest where Satsuki had wounded her. The skin was whole and unbroken now, but somehow she knew that this was where it had been.

She had tried to kill Mako. That hadn't been a dream at all: her best friend had come into the shell Ryūko had built around herself, and tried desperately to bring her back to the real world. Mako had tried to save her from herself… *again*… and Ryūko had tried to kill her.

"Where is she?" Ryūko whispered. "Mako, where is she? I need to see her!"

"I shall send someone…" Satsuki began, but Ryūko cut her off by throwing back the sheets and getting to her feet.

"No, *I* need to see her!" Ryūko insisted. "Where did she go?"

"She did not say," Satsuki said coolly, "nor did I ask. And you look like you can barely stand, Matoi."

"I can stand just fine," Ryūko sneered. She then turned to Senketsu. "Look… I know I have a lot to answer to you for, and to apologize for, but… for now, at least, can I wear you again?"

Your willingness is all the apology I need , Senketsu said quietly, slithering off his hanger and springing into Ryūko's arms so that she could put him on.

Ryūko quickly realized that she had no underwear, but there was no time to worry about that either. *Commando it is*, she thought, though she guessed that by now everyone on the ship had seen her naked anyway. Once she had Senketsu on and had snapped his suspenders into place, she immediately began feeling a little stronger and more clear-headed. "I'm going," she said to Satsuki.

"As you like," Satsuki nodded, giving a hint of a smirk. "Please don't be long, though. Our mother has begun the final phase of her plan, so as soon as Iori has salvaged what he can from Junketsu, we will be attacking." She looked appraisingly at the younger girl. "If you do not wish to fight after all you have endured, I will understand, but I must at least ask the assistance of Senketsu if this is the case."

"Don't worry," Ryūko nodded stiffly. "I've got a score to settle with that bitch." More memories were coming into clarity now, including having been touched in a way that a mother should *never* touch her daughter.

"Indeed," Satsuki nodded in reply, her eyes growing dark and fierce, causing Ryūko to literally take a step back. At that moment, she realized that what she had endured in her brief time with Ragyō had

been merely that: a brief time. How much worse had it been for Satsuki?

She shook her head. "I'm going," she said again, striding toward the exit.

"As you like," Satsuki replied in turn, but then added something that made Ryūko stop in her tracks: "… imōto-san."

Ryūko looked back at the other girl, who had not moved from her seat or even turned toward her as she had said this.

There was a long silence between them, and then Ryūko continued toward the door. She had something she needed to do before she could even *think* about that.

She eventually saw Mako sitting on the edge of the main deck of the ship, dangling her legs over the edge and softly swinging them back and forth. Before she could come any closer, though, she hesitated.

"Senketsu," she said quietly, "was all of that true? Were you two actually… there inside me?"

It is indeed true , Senketsu replied.

"Well… I can see how *you* might have just… I dunno, *merged* with the life fibers inside me, but… how did Mako get there?"

I brought her with me.

"Why?"

For two reasons, Senketsu explained. ***First of all, I felt that she would be more likely to reach you than I. Secondly… she wanted to be there.***

Ryūko found that she was again clutching that spot on her chest. "And then… Senketsu, did… *that* really happen?"

Yes, Senketsu said softly. ***I swore that I would keep Mako safe, and was able to spare her from bodily harm by taking the blow for her, but…***

"That was still her blood, then, wasn't it?" Ryūko whispered. "Since you'd just been worn by her."

Mostly, though some was surely Satsuki's as well.

Ryūko felt sick inside. She had shed their blood, and then both of them had given more of it to her willingly. "How can I apologize for this, Senketsu?"

I am certain you will think of something.

"I don't suppose you could whisper me a few hints along the way?"

Normally I would, Ryūko, but I am very weary from our recent exertions. I shall be resting for a time. His voice then faded away, as it normally did when he slept.

"Coward," Ryūko muttered, though she was not certain to whom she was referring.

She took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, then walked barefoot across the deck to join Mako at the edge. "Is this seat taken?" she asked.

"Ryūko-chan!" Mako exclaimed, looking up at her. Her eyes were then drawn to Ryūko's wind-blown skirt, and she blushed profusely and looked away. "You're- you're awake!"

"Yeah, finally," Ryūko sighed, carefully sitting beside the other girl and mimicking her pose. Mako was once again dressed in her school uniform rather than that ridiculous Nudist Beach gear, and the sight of her was refreshingly normal. "How're you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm fine!" Mako said cheerfully, but it rang hollow in Ryūko's ears. "Are you and Senketsu getting along again, then? I'm so glad."

Ryūko nodded silently, and a long, awkward pause followed. Mako was playing nervously with the hem of her skirt, and had not yet looked back at Ryūko in spite of her forced smile.

In the end, Ryūko decided that there was no delicate way to approach this. "I'm sorry, Mako," she sighed softly.

She half-expected to hear "For what?" or "Oh, don't worry about it," but Mako was quiet for a long time, and what she eventually *did* say pierced Ryūko to the soul. "Ryūko-chan tried to kill me."

"I'm so sorry, Mako," Ryūko whispered. "I… wasn't myself. I'm so sorry I frightened you like I did, and I'm very grateful Senketsu was there to stop me."

"I thought you were gone forever," Mako said miserably. "I barely saw the swing, and then… there was blood everywhere, and I thought that my Ryūko-chan was never going to come back, and I was… I was so *scared*…"

"That's just like you, Mako," Ryūko smiled in spite of the words. "I hacked at you with a meter-long blade, and you were worried for *me* instead of *yourself?* "

"Oh, I was scared for me, too," Mako nodded quickly. "I think I might've peed. So, um, sorry if I made a mess in there."

"If you did, I deserved it," Ryūko chuckled. "I deserved worse than that. What I *didn't* deserve was for you to risk your life to save me again."

"But I had to," Mako whispered, still looking out over the ocean. Her smile was long gone now, and Ryūko found herself hard-pressed to remember a time when she had seen Mako look this desolate. "I had to try, and then… it didn't work. It wasn't enough. You still…"

"It was enough, Mako," Ryūko assured her. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Mako did not reply, and Ryūko took another deep breath. There was more that she had to say, even though she knew this would be the hardest part of all. "Mako," she said in a low voice, "did you mean what you said in there?"

"What do you mean, Ryūko-chan?" Mako asked.

"About… how I should just kill you if I wasn't going to come back?" She felt a lump rising in her throat, and swallowed against it. "Did you really mean that, Mako?"

Mako's lips worked silently for a few moments before tightening into a frown, and she nodded. "I'd rather die than lose my Ryūko-chan."

Ryūko felt an uncomfortable heat rising within her. To have said it in the heat of the moment was one thing, but to be saying it now..?

"That's… Mako, I'm amazed that you think that, and… humbled, and flattered, and you need to *stop that right now* ."

Here, finally, Mako turned shocked eyes toward her. It was not quite like that terrified face that would haunt Ryūko's nightmares from now on, but it was close. "Ryūko-chan?"

"I'm serious," Ryūko grated. "Your life is worth more than that. Don't you *dare* throw it away if something happens to me. You have a family that loves you, and… and this crappy world is a *far* better place with you in it."

"But… I don't want to lose Ryūko-chan," Mako said lamely.

"Mako," Ryūko said steadily, "think about what's happening here. Our goal is to defeat the life fibers, right? To snuff them out so they can't hurt anybody anymore. We need to rid *the entire world* of them if we're going to win."

The younger girl nodded, tears welling in her eyes. "But you *will* win, Ryūko-chan!"

"Maybe," Ryūko snorted, but then she leaned closer and tapped herself on the chest, right over that same spot. "But if there are no more life fibers left in the world…"

Mako looked from her eyes to her chest several times before her face contorted in horror, and before Ryūko knew it, Mako had tackled her to the deck, straddling her waist and pinning down her wrists. "*No*, Ryūko-chan, that's *not* going to happen! Ryūko-chan won't die! Ryūko-chan *can't* die! I won't *let* you! I'll make Senketsu pull me inside you again, and I'll… I'll give you all of *my* blood, and you can use *my* heart, and… and I won't shut up, I'll just keep talking in my *annoying* voice and *force* you to stay awake!"

She probably could have thrown Mako off easily enough, but Ryūko was too stunned to move. "Mako…" she whispered.

"So stop talking about dying, Ryūko-chan, because this world needs you, too, and I told you I'd always be by your side, and I will be, even if it has to be inside you rather than beside you! I'm a doctor's daughter, I'll have you know, and I'll fix you up from the inside and keep your blood flowing and your heart beating, and *I will not let you die, do you understand me?!* "

Ryūko tried to speak, but suddenly she could not, because Mako was tearfully, desperately kissing her.

Unbidden, the memory of another recent kiss came to her mind, but that had been something foul and twisted: a show of ownership and dominance. This was something very different: a mix of want, fear, and beneath it all, unwavering devotion. Ryūko had not been aware that it was even *possible* to be kissed in this way, and before long, she was giving as good as she got. She wanted to bring her arms up around the other girl's neck, but Mako was still pinning her with surprising strength. She felt Mako's tears splashing against her face, and the younger girl was making little moans into her mouth as lips and tongues met wetly.

They had to breathe eventually, though, and Mako pushed herself away and stared down at Ryūko, her lips trembling.

"What was that for?" Ryūko asked in a breathless whisper.

"That was because I love you, dummy," Mako said with a choked laugh that sounded more like a sob. "So stop talking about dying, okay?"

"Okay," Ryūko nodded, "but… only if you promise me that you won't… follow me. Not there." She gave a faint smile. "Even if I die, Mako, I won't leave you. It sounds cheesy to say that, but… I think it can be true if we want it to be."

Mako blinked away a few more tears, then she nodded as well. "Okay," she whispered. "But it's not going to be an issue, because Ryūko-chan isn't going to die."

The younger girl seemed to deflate a little, then, and she settled to the deck beside Ryūko, still not letting go. Ryūko slipped her arms around Mako as well and held her tightly. Her mind was still spinning, though, and there was something she had to know for sure. "Mako?"

"Mmm?"

"You… love me?"

"Of course I do, silly."

"Do you… um… do you *love* -love me, or just love me?"

There was a small but very Mako-like giggle, and then Ryūko found her sight filled with Mako's brown eyes. " *Aishiteiru*, Ryūko-chan."

"Mako," she whispered, but there was no time for more, as Mako was kissing her again, making the entire world fade away for a few wonderful moments.

"So yeah, I guess I *love* -love you," Mako said after they broke.

"Well, you did sort of storm into the church to break up my loveless wedding, didn't you?" Ryūko grinned. "If that's not romantic, what is?"

Mako snuggled against her shoulder. "I guess so."

"So… I suppose that means I'll just *have* to live now, won't I?"

"And don't you forget it."

They lay there snuggled together for a long while, then Ryūko kissed Mako's hair and slowly pulled the both of them to a seated position, then to their feet. "Come on," she smiled, looking down at their joined hands. "I need to find some shoes and something to eat, and then… maybe we could… take a little more time to remind ourselves what we're fighting for?" She tried to say it in a suave, cool voice, but she realized that she had completely blown it by blushing like a fool.

Mako smiled that smile that had never failed to light up Ryūko's heart. "Sounds perfect, Ryūko-chan!"

Episode 22

(Episode 22 edition)

The croquette was the most delicious thing Satsuki had ever tasted.

It was greasy, it was over-spiced, and it was made of an impossible mixture of who-knows-what, but there was something indescribably wonderful about it. Somehow, sitting in this circle with her long-lost sister, the irrepressible Mankanshoku family, her five most loyal companions, and even the senior officers of Nudist Beach, gave this mysterious fried "delicacy" a finer flavor than any *haute cuisine* .

Gradually, as she watched the smiling faces and listened to the happy conversation around her, she realized what the secret ingredient was, and she could not help but smile as she thought about how downright *corny* it sounded: it tasted wonderful because it was a meal shared, and because it had been prepared with *love* .

Satsuki was no stranger to fine eating, but her meals had most often been prepared by servants, who infused every dish with their sense of duty and honor. These croquettes, on the other hand, were made by a mother for her family, and at this moment, Satsuki realized, she, the Elite Four, and Iori had been welcomed into that family.

She said little as she ate, but instead let herself simply soak in the unfamiliar atmosphere. Mako, seated to her left, was alternating between giving Satsuki a brief history of her mother's culinary endeavors and fussing over Ryūko, who was sitting to the other side of the cheerful no-star, digging in heartily. Opposite them, Satsuki noticed Gamagōri watching Mako intently, an unusual blush coloring his hard features, while Nonon, in turn, watched him and snickered.

Perhaps there was something to Nonon's gossip after all: Satsuki's enforcer certainly seemed rather intent on the Mankanshoku girl. Not

that it was doing him any good, of course, as Mako had eyes only for Ryūko, as always.

But even that wasn't quite true anymore, as Mako had been at least as attentive to Satsuki herself, and the Queen of Honnōji was finding herself utterly charmed by this strange girl. While she never lost her manners (always calling her Satsuki-sama), she was so obviously thrilled to be sitting between her school president and her obvious crush that she could scarcely contain herself. There was nothing false or affected about Mankanshoku Mako, and nothing hidden beneath the surface: she was who she was, and she shared that with you wholly and unreservedly, holding nothing back. After years of living within a web of deceit, even fearing to fully trust those closest to her, Satsuki found Mako simply fascinating, and for the first time in her life, truly envied the life of a no-star.

As the meal continued, Ryūko eventually excused herself, taking a heaping plate with her as she went to sit alone. Mako looked disappointed for a moment, but then her smile returned.

"Aren't you going to go with her?" Satsuki asked the younger girl.

Mako blinked at Satsuki a few times in surprise, then shook her head and smiled. "Oh, no, Satsuki-sama. Ryūko-chan and Senketsu-chan need some time to themselves. Poor Senketsu-chan's been alone for a long time, and I'm sure they have a lot to catch up on."

"I see," Satsuki nodded, casting her eyes toward her younger sister, who had taken a seat at the edge of the deck. She certainly appeared to be in conversation with *someone*, at any rate.

"More croquettes, Satsuki-sama?" Mako asked, reaching across the serving platters from her kneeling position to grab something else unidentifiable from the mass of breading.

"No, thank you," Satsuki smiled. She'd been doing a lot of smiling today: more than she had in longer than she could remember. "Actually, Mankanshoku-kun," she went on, pitching her voice so that

only Mako would hear over the spirited dinnertime conversation, "would you walk with me for a moment?"

Mako looked shocked and a little nervous at the request, and for a moment Satsuki was worried that she might have broken the spell, returning Mako to a frightened no-star in the presence of her queen. "Of- of course, Satsuki-sama," Mako nodded.

After offering thanks for the meal, Satsuki stood and walked off into the evening darkness, Mako two steps behind her. She made a point to go opposite the direction that Ryūko had taken, and before long, she and Mako were alone somewhere on the ruined expanse of the ship's main deck.

"Mankanshoku-kun," Satsuki began, but the remainder of the words quickly died in her throat.

"Um… yes, Satsuki-sama?" Mako asked at length.

Satsuki turned to Mako and gave her a wan smile. "Tell me about my sister," she bade the younger girl.

"Ryūko-chan?" Mako asked, her eyes going wide. "Um… what does Satsuki-sama want to know?"

"Anything," Satsuki sighed, realizing that she had even more to be jealous of. "What is it like to live with her? How does it feel to have her at your side?"

"Oh, living with Ryūko-chan is *wonderful*," Mako gushed. "She's so pretty and brave and caring, and even though she's always trying to be so tough on the outside, she can be sweet and even a little gooey on the inside, I think." The younger girl's smile faded a bit. "But she's also sad sometimes, too, and I want to be strong for *her* when she needs me, even though she tries not to need *anybody* most of the time. I've never known anyone as wonderful and awesome as Ryūko-chan."

There was a pause, and then Mako's face filled with panic. "I mean… um… Satsuki-sama is wonderful and awesome also, of course! I didn't mean any..!"

"It's fine, Mankanshoku-kun," Satsuki chuckled. "I am not offended in the least. You've nothing to fear from me."

"Um, thank you, Satsuki-sama," Mako bowed, but she was still pulling at her fingers nervously. "Um… if I may say so, Satsuki-sama, it doesn't surprise me to know that you and she are sisters."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because…" Mako fumbled for the words, "you and she are both… like magnets. People can't help but look at you, do you know what I mean? It's like you're both more than human, somehow, and…"

There was a pause, and Mako actually scuffed the deck with her shoe. It was one of the most adorable things Satsuki had ever seen. "It's like being with Ryūko-chan is the best thing that could have ever happened to me outside my own family, and… it's actually a lot like I imagined it would be to be friends with… someone like you."

Satsuki stared at the no-star girl for a few long seconds, then smiled again. "Mankanshoku-kun… may I call you Mako?"

"Um, Satsuki-sama may call me whatever Satsuki-sama wants," Mako blushed.

"Then I would like to call you Mako. In return, if it would make you more comfortable, you may simply call me Satsuki."

Mako blushed more intently for a moment, then went pale, and Satsuki realized that she might have erred in her effort to break some of the barriers between them. "Um… I'm sorry, Satsuki-sama," Mako quavered, "but I don't think that would be very comfortable at all."

"I understand," Satsuki nodded, realizing that the equal footing afforded them by dining together was now in the distant past. She found herself desperately missing the unreserved girl she had come to know over croquettes. Something to be done in smaller steps later, she hoped.

"I don't mean to disobey Satsuki-sama either," Mako said miserably.

"Honestly, Mako, I am not offended or slighted in any way. If anything, I regret the disparity in our ranks, and the distance it places between us. You see…" Here, Satsuki turned her gaze onto the shorter girl. "I would be quite honored to consider you a friend."

Mako's eyes became tiny dots of color drowned in a huge white sea. "An… an honor? Um… but… Satsuki-sama, why?" she squeaked. "Wh- what am I?"

"You're the one who has taken care of my sister since her arrival at Honnōji Academy," Satsuki explained patiently. "You opened your home and your heart to her. You alone have remained loyal to her through every trial. You defended her against enemies far more powerful than yourself, and inspired her though your unwavering faith. You resisted the temptation of riches and power and returned to poverty rather than lose her. You stood between us in battle more times than I care to remember, defying myself and the Elite Four in ways that have led other students to exile or worse.

"And what's more," she continued, crouching slightly so that she was almost to Mako's eye level, "you have now twice saved her when no one else could have, and in so doing have demonstrated not only loyalty and steadfastness, but unconditional love." Satsuki gave Mako a slight smile. "What fool would do anything but cherish a friend like you?"

Mako was quiet for a very long time, and could not meet Satsuki's eyes. At last, she whispered: "Thank you, Satsuki-sama."

"Along with this," Satsuki said then, straightening up, "you should know that you have gained my trust, Mako, and that is something I have *never* given easily. You delivered my message to the Elite Four unerringly this afternoon."

"Only because Satsuki-sama was kind enough to write it on my hands," Mako almost laughed, a smile peeking through her nervous mask.

"Nonetheless, you *did* it."

"I… suppose so," Mako nodded. "Um, thank you for writing it in hiragana, though. I'm sorry I'm not better at kanji."

Satsuki frowned, remembering the look of panic on Mako's face as she had allowed Satsuki to write on her palms. She did not know every detail of the girl's academic record, but from what she had skimmed over (while investigating the friend of the transfer student some months back), she knew that Mako was nothing short of an abysmal student: functionally illiterate in spite of having made it to the second year of high school.

At that moment, something clicked in Satsuki's memory: something she had not noticed at the time it had happened due to her focus on the forthcoming battle. While reviewing the plans written on her hands, Mako had been holding them very close to her face and squinting. "Mako," Satsuki asked, "do you have problems with your eyesight?"

"Oh!" Mako exclaimed, looking surprised at her president's observation. "Um, yeah, it's kind of bad, I guess," she said then, reaching around to scratch the back of her head in seeming embarrassment. "Dad said it was probably more than twenty-hundred, whatever that means, because even his glasses didn't help much."

"Twenty/one hundred…" Satsuki whispered. Age seventeen, and she was worse than halfway to legal blindness? "That would make

schoolwork almost impossible, Mako!"

"It's… kind of hard to read the board from anywhere in the room," Mako admitted. "'Course, it doesn't help that I fall asleep all the time."

"Then… why not wear glasses?" Satsuki asked.

Mako looked up at her then, and before she even spoke, Satsuki knew the answer. It felt like a kick to the stomach. "Because we can't afford them," Mako said simply. "Dad knows an eye doctor, but there's no one in the no-star district who can make lenses, and… we just can't afford to see a doctor in the one-star district." She then brightened considerably. "But it's okay, Satsuki-sama! I'm used to it, so it doesn't bother me."

"You're… used to it…" Satsuki whispered, horrified at the thought of what else this girl might be used to, living in the slums. The envy she had felt minutes ago was turning to a chill in her heart.

"That's really the one thing that I miss about being a two-star," Mako went on, looking a little wistful. "I had some awesome cats-eye glasses for a while there." She then blushed a little. "It was the first time I really got to see how pretty Ryūko-chan is."

The twisting feeling inside Satsuki intensified. "How can you not hate me?" she whispered.

Mako turned shocked eyes on the taller girl. "Satsuki-sama?"

"How can you not hate me?" she repeated, more forcefully this time. "You look at me with… with admiration, and deference, when… I'm the one who *did* this to you! I'm the one who created the *world* that did this to you! I'm the reason for *everything* you've suffered through! By all rights, you should hate me with all your soul!"

"But… I don't hate Satsuki-sama at all!" Mako exclaimed, looking aghast at the very idea.

"I fully deserve it," Satsuki whispered, shaking her head and closing her eyes.

Then, to her abject shock, Satsuki felt arms around her and a face nestled against her chest. Her eyes snapped open, and she stared in disbelief at the mass of messy brown hair beneath her.

Mako was hugging her.

"Please don't say that, Satsuki-sama," Mako whispered against her. "No one deserves to be hated. I might have not liked the way you always fought with Ryūko-chan, but that was before you knew she was your sister, and besides, you were one of the good guys all along, right?"

Slowly, gingerly, Satsuki put her arms around Mako as well, settling into the embrace. "Don't be so sure of that," she said roughly. "I've done some terrible things."

"Maybe, but those things ended up with you here, and all of us on the same side, and you and your sister being together again, so it couldn't have been *all* bad, right?"

Satsuki nodded slowly, then gently pushed the other girl to arms' length. "Your faith in me is inspiring," she smiled softly. "I can see now why you've been so helpful to my sister. I assure you, Mako, that when this is over… there will be changes, and you and your family will want for nothing. A return to two-star life would be the very least I could do for the one who saved my sister's life."

At this, Mako actually flinched. "Um… if it's all the same, Satsuki-sama, I don't think we would want to go back to that. None of us… um, liked the people we were then."

"We'll come up with something, then," Satsuki assured her, and then in spite of herself, she grinned wickedly. "After all, I would expect my sister to be well taken care of."

"Um, what do you mean, Satsuki-sama?" Mako asked, again going slightly pale.

"Well… now that I have a younger sister again, there are certain duties I must perform as the *onee-chan* ." Her grin widened, and she narrowed her eyes at the other girl. "For example, if anyone has romantic designs on my *im ō to*, they would surely have to pass my rigorous standards."

Mako gasped, and then fired back a look of sheer indignation. "That's not fair, Satsuki-sama! I loved Ryūko-chan before you even *knew* she was your sister!" Her hands then flew to her mouth, and her eyes bugged. "Um, I mean..!"

"Oh, I think I know what you meant," Satsuki chuckled. She then smiled more warmly, as it was obvious that Mako was about ready to pass out. "Then let me at least approximate my sisterly duties and ask you this: are you in love with her?"

"Yes," Mako said without hesitation. "I mean… I think I am, and…"

"You needn't say more," Satsuki nodded, holding up one hand to stop the other girl. "If that is what you seek, then you have my sisterly blessing to pursue it… though you may wish to tell her plainly. I know her well enough to see that she has no concept of subtlety."

"That's true," Mako smiled, relief peeking through the embarrassment now. "Can I… ask a favor of you, Satsuki-sama?"

"Of course. You have earned that, at the very least."

Mako nodded slowly. "I know that you're going to be fighting again soon."

"Indeed."

"Could you… please take extra-good care of Ryūko-chan when you're in battle together?" Mako asked. "That's something that I don't think I'll be able to do for her this time, as much as I wish I could."

Satsuki studied Mako's expression for a moment, seeing the worry and frustration at war on her pretty face. "You'd go to battle for her if you could, wouldn't you?"

"In a heartbeat," Mako nodded. "But… I can't have her worrying about protecting me when the whole world's at stake."

"Indeed," Satsuki pondered. Then, quite suddenly, the perfect answer presented itself. "Come with me, Mako."

Mako was led back to the interior of the ship, and taken to a large room that had been converted into a laboratory of some sort. Large piles of recovered life fibers lined the walls, and what looked like a monstrous sewing machine had been set up near the center. Inside, Sewing Club President Shiro Iori was discussing something with Mohawk Man and Mikisugi-sensei.

Satsuki told Mako to wait at the door, then went inside to join the discussion. After a while, Iori turned up the collar on his uniform coat, revealing a third star, and with a cry of " *Tailor's Regalia!"* transformed himself into a shape with multiple fabric arms. Mako was awed and impressed at the display of *goku* uniform power: she had been under the impression that there were none left! And Iori was a three-star, as well? Did that mean there were an Elite Five instead of an Elite Four?

At this point, Satsuki dismissed Mikisugi-sensei and Mohawk Man, then beckoned Mako into the room. Passing her former homeroom teacher and the surly Nudist Beach officer on the way in, the no-star obediently entered the lab to stand beside her school president.

"Iori," Satsuki said to her chief tailor, "you remember Mankanshoku Mako, yes?"

"Former president of the Fight Club," the blonde man nodded to her. "Two-star uniform. One of my favorites to construct, to be honest."

"Would you be able to rebuild it, using our most current data to make it stronger and more resilient than before?"

"Of course, Satsuki-sama."

"Good. Then take her measurements, and make it your first priority, before even the Elite Four."

Mako felt her heart thudding against her chest. "Ehh? But… Satsuki-sama?! I… I can't wear that uniform again!"

"Why not?" Satsuki asked, arching her eyebrows at Mako.

"Because… because I fought with Ryūko-chan in that uniform! I was… I was a bad person when I wore it!"

"I disagree," Satsuki frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. "I believe you more than learned from your mistakes that day. Aside from which… this time you could use it to fight at her side."

"At her side?" Mako repeated, scarcely daring to believe it.

"This is a battle for the fate of humanity, Mankanshoku-kun," Satsuki said then, her voice once more that of the Queen of Honnōji. "I need every able-bodied fighter that I can trust. This means you."

Mako took a deep breath, then looked from Satsuki to Iori and back again.

"I… won't let you down, Satsuki-sama!" she bowed, even as her heart sang with excitement. "I'll have your back, and Ryūko-chan's, too!"

"Exactly what I hoped you'd say," Satsuki smiled. "Master tailor, I leave her in your hands."

"As you wish, Satsuki-sama," Iori bowed. "Come, Mankanshoku-kun. Let's prepare you for the battlefield."

" *Hai!"*

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Another fill-in-the-gaps story this time, since I don't dare speculate about what's coming up next. Thanks, as always, for reading, and Happy White Day!

Episode 23

(Episode 23 edition)

Iori let a frustrated growl escape as he tried in vain to complete the next two-star uniform. The reconfiguration of the Naked Sol, as well as the ongoing bombardment, had forced him to move his sewing operations into the ship's power plant, but even here, the damage had been severe. His own goku uniform was enough to power the machinery needed for the construction of further uniforms, but barely so, and fabrication had slowed to a frustrating crawl, even as more and more former club presidents were awakening sufficiently to be impressed back into service.

"Iori-senpai! *Iori-senpai!* "

"I'm a little busy right now, Mankanshoku-kun!" Iori said through gritted teeth as the Fight Club president hurried to his side.

"But Iori-senpai, I need your help! I need you to make this uniform so that it can fly! Ryūko-chan needs me! She's attacking the big life fiber by herself!"

"Mankanshoku-kun, this is no time for last-second alterations!" Iori shouted, keeping his eyes focused on the mammoth sewing machine in front of him. "I have more than twenty uniforms in progress right now, but with two of the ship's turbines down, I lack the power to complete them!"

"Mikisugi-san wants to launch the ship into the life fiber cocoon to help Matoi," said an unnamed Nudist Beach officer at the nearby control panel, "but we lack the power for that, as well. If we could only get more speed out of the last turbine, we might have a chance."

Iori cast a moment's glance at the huge hamster-wheel contraption in question, where ten exhausted Nudists were desperately trying to keep it turning by the force of their failing legs. Not much chance of that, he sighed internally.

"Everyone, clear out!" came an amplified voice, then, and Iori again tore his eyes away from his work, this time in surprise.

Standing at the base of the turbine, holding a megaphone that she had produced from God-knows-where, was Mankanshoku. She quickly shooed the staggering Nudists away, then took her place alone inside the wheel.

"Is that Mankanshoku?" came the voice of former Tennis Club president Hakodate Omiko, standing nearby with several of her fellow ex-two-stars.

After a pause in which she looked as though she were actually saying a prayer, Mankanshoku began to run, and the spokes of the turbine immediately became a blur. Sparks flew from the attached generators, and the power plant was suddenly flooded with light. Iori felt the power flooding to his goku fabricator as well, taking the strain off of his own uniform and allowing him to use its full strength to resume construction. " *Club presidents, get ready!"* he called. " *Hakodate, you're up first! Fukuroda, stand by!"*

"All hands, brace yourselves!" the officer at the controls shouted. "We're going airborne!"

Mako felt the ship shuddering around her as it took to the air, but she never missed a step. She was smiling now, and all the pain of her earlier battles was draining away as a mix of adrenaline and goku energy coursed through her, leaving her limbs weightless and her blood white-hot. They would be at Ryūko's side soon, but only if she kept the pace.

Soon, she realized that there was another girl running just behind her. "Hah! You never *were* good at tennis, Mankanshoku, but you would have been a natural in the Running Club!"

"Thanks, Hakodate-senpai!" she called to her one-time club president.

"Impact with the life fiber vessel in three seconds!" came the voice of one of the Nudist officers. "Two! One! *Impact!* "

Mako felt the crash more than heard it, and the wheel turning beneath her suddenly began screaming with resistance as the lights dimmed around them. She dug in even harder with her spiked sandals and kept the treads moving as best she could, but it was going to take more than this.

But then another pair of legs joined them in the person of Boxing Club president Fukuroda Takaharu, and soon there were two-star club presidents lining up to jump into the turbine as Iori continued flinging uniform after uniform from his personal hurricane of movement near the goku fabricator. Mako led the pack as they returned the turbine to maximum power, no longer feeling anything at all in her own legs, but not caring in the least.

Then, both over the loudspeakers in the power plant and from somewhere inside, Mako heard Ryūko's voice. "Mako?! Mako, is that you?!"

"Ryūko-chaaaan!" she shouted. She knew, somehow, that the blood she had left with Senketsu earlier that day was carrying her heart, her voice and her love to Ryūko's side, even as her legs brought the Naked Sol to her aid. " *Ryūko-chaaaan!"*

"Mako, it's you, right?!" came Ryūko's voice again. " *Mako?!"*

"Everyone - *everyone's heeeeeere!* "

Somehow, just the knowledge that Mako was there gave Ryūko the strength she needed to make the final cut with the Rending Scissors, severing the original life fiber with a final satisfying slice. Around her, the central chamber of the life fiber shell began to shudder, and Ryūko was certain she could hear screaming. "Senketsu!" she cried.

You've done it, Ryūko , Senketsu answered in her mind. ***It's finished*** .

"And what about you?" Ryūko shouted over the deafening screech of the Nudist Beach ship further carving its way through the protective shell around the alien entity.

I am not affected , Senketsu assured her, ***and neither are you. But we must escape before your blood levels get dangerously low*** .

"Then it's lucky for us that our ride is here," Ryūko laughed, alighting on the top deck of the Naked Sol and disengaging *Senketsu Shippu* . "This beast's gonna blast right through!"

" *Ryūko-chan!"* came a distant shout, but this time she heard it with her ears as well as though her connection with Senketsu. Ryūko whirled around to see Mako emerge from one of the main hatches and start running wobbily toward her. " *Ryūko-chaaaaan!"*

"Mako!" Ryūko called, dashing forward to meet her best friend. Mako looked dead on her feet, but was still running toward her, arms outstretched. With what looked like the proverbial last of her strength, Mako leaped weakly forward to give Ryūko one of her tackle-hugs: the same kind that she had attempted that first day together, only to crash to the ground when Ryūko dodged her.

This time, though, Ryūko caught her mid-flight and spun her around in a full circle, holding on for all she was worth. "Mako! You're safe!"

"Ryūko-chan, Ryūko-chan, *Ryūko-chan!* " Mako wailed. "I thought you were dead, Ryūko-chan! I thought you weren't coming back! I was so scared!"

"I'm right here, Mako," Ryūko grinned, holding the other girl tightly against her.

"Don't… don't scare me like that again, Ryūko-chan…" Mako sniffed, her voice suddenly very soft and weak. Then, to Ryūko's alarm, Mako went completely limp in her arms.

"Mako!" Ryūko shouted.

She is unconscious, Senketsu informed her, **and thoroughly exhausted. She will recover** .

Ryūko swept Mako into her arms, then, carrying her bridal-style. After taking a quick look around, she realized that they were on the verge of bursting out the other side of the life fiber cocoon, so she shot out threads to anchor herself to the deck and held on, with Mako cradled against her.

There was another horrible tearing and screaming noise as the Naked Sol sliced through the already-unraveling far end of the shell and burst out into open air. Moments later, she was joined on the deck by five others: Satsuki and her Elite Four. Ryūko grinned as she caught sight of her sister, battered but safe, and Satsuki returned it with a smile of her own. "Did you succeed?" the older sister asked.

"Yeah, it's toast!" Ryūko nodded. "I wish I could see the look on Ragyō's face right now!"

"You could always look right over there, then," Sanageyama laughed, pointing back toward the alien seed pod.

Ryūko looked in the direction the swordsman was indicating, and there indeed was Ragyō, hovering above the already-shriveling mass of alien life fibers, a look of naked shock on her face.

"You look all dazed and confused, Ragyō!" Ryūko called, instinctively clutching Mako more tightly against her. "That ain't surprising, 'cause

not making sense is our kind of thing!"

Satsuki nodded and called a challenge of her own. "The girl you mocked as a sham will thwart you! Humanity does *not* live for clothing!"

If their beast of a mother had a reply, it was lost to them as the ship sailed on through the air, quickly losing altitude. Ryūko's eyes went wide as she quickly realized that this was not a controlled descent, but a free-fall.

Satsuki must have realized the same thing. " *Brace for impact!"* she shouted above the increasing sound of the air whipping past.

Once again, Ryūko sent tethers from the skirt of Senketsu to pierce the deck and hold them in place while she curved her body protectively around Mako. Nearby, Gamagōri dug in with both massive hands, intending to use his own body to cushion the blow for Satsuki and the remaining Elite Four, even as Jakuzure took to the air, dragging Inumuta with her.

With a deafening crunch, the prow of the Naked Sol smashed into the outer wall around Honnouji Academy, even as the ship's knife-like fins snapped off and plummeted down the mountainside to land in the slums. Ryūko hung onto Mako for dear life as they were first tossed forward with the impact, then back and down as the rear of the ship likewise crashed to Earth. Several of Senketsu's tethers pulled free, not from their own weakness but due to the structure of the ship itself cracking and crumbling away around them, and Ryūko found herself literally hitting the deck, Mako landing on top of her as they fell.

Finally, it was all over, and there was only silence save for the creaking of the Naked Sol as it settled into its unexpected drydock. For a moment, all Ryūko could do was listen to the pounding of her own heart. "Senketsu?" she whispered.

I am unharmed.

"Good. And Mako?"

She appears uninjured as well.

Ryūko let out the breath she had been holding. They were safe, at least for now.

"Are you hurt, Ryūko?" came Satsuki's voice then, and Ryūko looked up to see her sister standing over them, with Gamagōri behind her. A quick look around revealed a battered but unharmed Sanageyama picking himself up close by, even as Jakuzure and Inumuta came in for a landing near the others.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Ryūko chuckled, trying to push herself to her feet, but it was proving to be next to impossible with Mako on top of her. "I don't suppose one of you could give me a hand?"

Gamagōri quickly moved forward, as though to pick Mako up off of her, but Satsuki was faster, crouching beside the fallen pair and taking the unconscious no-star in her arms. Ryūko nodded thanks, then slowly got to her feet, dusted herself off, and let out a brisk sigh. "Any landing you can walk away from, eh? Thanks, Satsuki. I can take her back now."

"It is no trouble," Satsuki replied, looking down at Mako's face and then back at Ryūko. "Take your time steadying yourself first."

"I said I can take her back now," Ryūko said meaningfully, holding her arms out.

Satsuki didn't quite smile at this, but her expression at least approached it. "As you like," she nodded, setting Mako back in Ryūko's arms.

"Much as I hate to do it, I have to give the slacker credit," Jakuzure smirked.

"You should be more respectful," Gamagōri half-growled. "Mankanshoku fought with strength and resolve far outweighing her status."

"She did?" Ryūko asked, eyes widening. She had heard over her headset that Mako had once more donned her Fight Club uniform to defend the ship, but she had been too occupied with Ragyō (not to mention minor annoyances like getting cut in half) to notice much of her friend's efforts.

"Indeed," Inumuta nodded, one hand to his own headset. "Based on what Iori tells me, she singlehandedly powered the ship long enough to allow him to outfit the remaining club presidents and bring the Naked Sol to your side."

"Mako did all that?" Ryūko whispered, looking at the sleeping girl in her arms.

Satsuki briefly let another smile escape, then looked around at the others, her expression suddenly all business again. "Nonon, Sanageyama, scout the area for enemies. This isn't over by a longshot. Gamagōri, Inumuta, get below decks and see if they need any assistance."

"At once, Satsuki-sama," Sanageyama bowed, and the Elite Four quickly dispersed, leaving the sisters alone with Mako.

There was a faint, tiny groan, and Mako stirred slightly in Ryūko's arms. Rather then awaken, though, she only cuddled closer, until she had her face buried against the underside of Ryūko's breast. Here, the sleeping girl smiled and made a contented "Mmmm" noise before nuzzling in deeper.

Ryūko felt the heat rising to her cheeks. "Oi, Mako!" she hissed. "Cut that out!"

"Like a child sleeping in her mother's arms?" Satsuki asked, raising her eyebrows in amusement.

To Ryūko's discomfort, Mako started doing a bit more than nuzzle, planting sleepy kisses against the curve of exposed skin. Well, maybe *discomfort* wasn't the right word, since it kind of felt *good*, but *Satsuki was standing right there*… "Heh, yep, just like a kid," Ryūko laughed nervously.

"Ryūko-chan is so sexy…" Mako said in a weak voice.

"Indeed, just like a child," Satsuki nodded, making an obvious effort not to laugh. "I'll leave you two alone, then. Don't be long, though."

"Oi, Satsuki, it's not..!" Ryūko started, but her sister was already walking away. Ryūko sighed and turned to look down at Mako again. "What am I gonna do with you, anyway?"

At that moment, Mako's eyelids fluttered open, and she made a visible effort to focus. "Ryūko-chan?" she said at last.

"Right here," Ryūko smiled at her.

"I… caught up to you, then?"

"You sure did. How are you feeling?"

Mako's face took on a comically thoughtful expression for a few seconds. "Hungry," she said at last.

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me at all," Ryūko chuckled, once again holding Mako more tightly against her. "I can't believe you did all that, Mako. You're completely nuts, you know that?"

"Maybe," Mako giggled weakly. "But I told you I'd always stay at your side, didn't I? Here I am, Ryūko-chan…"

Episode 24

(Episode 24 edition)

Ryūko could not help but be impressed as she rode into New Honnō City. In the few weeks that she had been away, a new beautiful waterfront community had sprung up around the sunken shell of the old academy, and Ryūko found herself in awe of the obvious care that had gone into the architecture in spite of the sheer speed of its construction.

Then again, if there was anything she had learned from being a student at Honnōji Academy, it was that anything could be built and rebuilt with alarming speed once the Kiryūin fortune had a part in it. Satsuki had really gone all-out in transforming the former three-tiered monstrosity into something beautiful and welcoming.

She checked her watch, and realized that now was not the time to enjoy the scenery: she had a long-delayed date to keep with someone she had missed very much during her (regrettably necessary) absence.

After leaving her motorcycle in a public parking area, she began wandering on foot, taking note of the street names and trying to find the agreed-upon meeting point. Eventually she reached the little café mentioned in last night's text message. A quick peek inside did not reveal any familiar faces, so she decided to wait outside, leaning against a neighboring brick building.

As much as she hated to admit it to herself, she was nervous. No amount of phone calls or text messages from the road could change the fact that she had insisted on making this trip alone. Yes, there had been family affairs to settle, and yes, she had a lot of things she needed to work through on her own after the loss of Senketsu, but this was someone who had stayed by her side through the thickest

and the thinnest of times, and Ryūko couldn't help but wonder if she had done irreparable damage to their already fledgling relationship by isolating herself these last few weeks.

She checked her watch: five minutes after eleven. Ryūko wondered darkly whether or not she would be stood up, and if so, whether or not she deserved it.

But then, completely blindsided by her own reverie, she found herself being tackle-hugged, and suddenly she had her arms filled with Mako, who quickly went from hugging her to grabbing her hands and spinning with her, and finally to embracing her tightly. "Ryūko-chan! I'm so happy to see you!"

"Mako!" Ryūko gasped, completely taken off-guard. Normally Mako would give advance warning of one of her leaping hugs by shouting her name from a distance, but this time it had been a sneak attack, and an effective one at that. Either Mako was getting better at these things, or Ryūko was really letting her reflexes slip now that the fighting had ended.

At last Mako took a step back, but did not release Ryūko's hands. "You look wonderful, Ryūko-chan," she said in an almost dreamy voice, studying the taller girl's face intently, a soft (but wide) smile on her lips and a slight blush lighting her cheeks. "I mean… you're so pretty, Ryūko-chan. Awww, I missed you *so much*…"

Before Ryūko could give any more thought to the potential damage her absence could have done, Mako took a quick look around, rolled her eyes humorously, and then leaned in and kissed Ryūko warmly and tenderly. Just like that, Ryūko felt her doubts evaporating. She should have known better than to doubt Mako's devotion, though she made a silent promise to never test it like this again.

"I… missed you too, Mako," Ryūko said after they broke, feeling a goofy smile and a blush color her face. She looked the smaller girl up and down. Rather than her old familiar school uniform, Mako was dressed in a long-sleeved white pullover with a little pink sweater-

vest, along with poofy darker-pink shorts and a silly purple backpack in the shape of a cartoon rabbit's head. It was so breathtakingly "normal high school girl" that Ryūko felt suddenly self-conscious of her own attire: white t-shirt, her old letterman, jeans and her everpresent white shoes. "Wow, we look like every bad stereotype of a lesbian couple ever, don't we?"

"Well, then let's add to the stereotype some more!" Mako giggled, leaning in to kiss her again. She then put her arms around Ryūko and hugged her tightly, and Ryūko did the same, holding Mako against her for a long while. Why had she taken herself away from this, anyway?

Again, they broke, and Ryūko found herself being happily scrutinized by Mako, who raised a hand to her face to trace the line of her jaw, seemingly mesmerized. It almost seemed as though Mako had never seen her before.

That was when Ryūko realized that something had indeed changed since the last time they had seen one another. "Mako, why aren't you wearing your glasses? Did you get contacts?"

"Nope!" Mako beamed. "Laser surgery. Remember those two days when I couldn't text for very long? That was when I was recovering. It was totally successful, too! My eyesight's completely perfect now!"

"That's great!" Ryūko smiled as Mako took her hand and led her down the wide sidewalk. "Did Satsuki set you up?"

"Nope, Dad paid for it himself," Mako said proudly. "His new practice is going great, Ryūko-chan! He really *is* a good doctor, you know. Now that he's in a proper hospital, he hasn't lost a single patient *or* gotten sued even once!" She squeezed Ryūko's hand fondly. "I can't *wait* for you to see the house! Your bedroom overlooks the bay, and the view is *so* nice. I've… um, kind of been sleeping in there instead of in my room. I hope you don't mind."

"'Course I don't mind," Ryūko laughed, but then her face grew more serious. "It's not like I was there to use it anyway. I'm… sorry, Mako. I'm sorry I was gone for so long."

"You're here now, though," Mako said in a voice that caught Ryūko off-guard with its tenderness. "I knew you'd come back, Ryūko-chan, so it's okay."

"Thanks," Ryūko blushed, looking down at her shoes. She then turned to see that they had left the café far behind, and she stopped in her tracks. "Hey… um, weren't we going to get lunch?"

"Not yet!" Mako grinned, coming around behind Ryūko and gently pushing her along the incline of the sidewalk. "We've got someone else to meet first!"

"Someone… else?" Ryūko said, feeling her doubts come rushing back in a cold clench. "Um, Mako? I thought you wanted this date to just be… um, the two of us?"

"I don't want to be selfish, though," Mako giggled, continuing to gently nudge her along the walkway. "There's someone else who's been missing you as much as I have, you know. Besides, we'll have plenty of chances for just-the-two-of-us-dates now that you're back, won't we?"

"Um, yeah, I guess we will," Ryūko said with a lopsided smile. It didn't take much effort to guess who their third party was this time, either. "So have you been looking after Satsuki for me while I've been gone? And has she been looking out for you?"

"As often as we can," Mako nodded. "She's been really busy, though, what with dissolving REVOCS and selling off all the other clothiers they bought out. Not to mention having to deal with the estate and the media and the government and the lawsuits, and the… oh, *gosh!*
"

"What?" Ryūko asked, turning back to see that Mako was pointing past her, toward the crest of the hill.

Standing there, wearing a simple white blouse and pale green skirt, was one of the most breathtakingly beautiful women Ryūko had ever seen. She was the sort of tall that invariably ends up labeled "statuesque," and her pale skin contrasted sharply with the messy bob-cut of her jet black hair.

It wasn't until this woman turned to look at them that Ryūko recognized her: she would know those eyebrows anywhere. "When… did Satsuki cut her hair?" she whispered to Mako.

"It must have just happened," Mako replied, staring unblinking at her former school president.

After making quite a show of their surprise, Ryūko and Mako did the only thing that anyone could do in such a situation: they rushed Satsuki and immediately began fussing over her and admiring her, much to the older girl's shock and embarrassment. Mako even produced a digital camera and a tripod from her backpack, allowing them to take a series of cheesy pictures with the blushing former Queen of Honnōji.

"Are you both *quite* done?" Satsuki asked at last.

"I dunno, nee-san," Ryūko chuckled. "What brought this on, anyway? Trying to go for the butch look? 'Cause that outfit's working against you if you are."

"I think you look great, Satsuki-sama!" Mako gushed. She looked between the two sisters, and Ryūko had the distinct feeling that she might explode from happiness at any moment. She was with both of her favorite people in the world (outside her own family) for the first time in weeks, and it was obvious that she was on the verge of overloading on sheer joy.

"We all together, then?" Ryūko asked, grabbing each of them by an arm. "How about lunch, then? I don't know about you two, but I'm *famished* ."

They went down into the bustling shopping district together and grabbed lunch at an udon stand, then sat down to eat at a small patio table. To no one's surprise, Mako quickly became the center of the conversation, asking Ryūko questions about her road trip and asking Satsuki questions about business and reconstruction. A few times, Ryūko noticed that Mako was asking her about things they had already discussed over the phone or via text, and wondered if the other girl had simply forgotten, but after a while, she realized that Mako was not just asking these questions for her own sake: she was helping the sisters catch up with one another as well. Consciously or not, she obviously recognized that Ryūko and Satsuki were neither of them very good at sharing, and was thus acting as the mediator to get them talking to one another.

Ryūko also noticed a few people glancing in their direction and whispering to one another, but only a few. She herself was known on sight to much of the population of New Honnō due to her role at the former academy, and while Satsuki's haircut seemed to have given her a degree of anonymity, there were curious eyes on her as well. But these looks were fleeting at best, as most people seemed to see them as exactly what they were at that moment: three teenage girls out shopping.

After lunch came ice cream, and after ice cream came shopping for clothes. The stores were already well-stocked with competing brands now that REVOCS had been split up: the newly "freed" clothing companies still had plenty of life-fiber-less stock that had been sitting in warehouses, and business was booming. Ryūko and Mako both took great pleasure in picking out different outfits for Satsuki, and were continually stunned by how good she made them look. With her height and build, Satsuki probably could have been a model had life turned out differently.

Mako ended up doing most of the actual purchasing. Now that she actually had some money to spend, she was very happily inflating that backpack of hers with an assortment of shirts, skirts, shorts, dresses, and even some… *frillier* things that she had tried to buy while the sisters weren't looking (she promised to show them to Ryūko in private later, though).

Even though this "date" was not what Ryūko had expected (though to be truthful, she had not known *what* to expect), she found that she was really having a good time just being a normal person having a normal afternoon with her sister and her… girlfriend? Was it too early to use that word? Maybe she should ask Mako what she thought about it, though she could certainly form an educated guess.

"Well, fancy meeting *you* here!"

Ryūko's train of thought was quickly derailed at the sound of this familiar voice. From around the corner of the next building stepped a diminutive pink-haired girl with a perpetual smirk.

"Good afternoon, Nonon," Satsuki nodded to her old friend.

"Oh, Satsuki-chan, your hair!" Nonon said, giving the much taller girl a look of comic dismay. "Don't tell me you went all Dramatic Haircut Symbolic Of Putting The Past Behind You?"

"It was time for a change," Satsuki smiled. "So what brings you here, Nonon? Out shopping?"

"Not exactly," Nonon frowned, casting a gaze down the street from which she'd emerged. She then let out a frustrated growl. "Oh, just *come on*, already! I'll drag you over here *myself* if I have to!"

Ryūko gave the smaller girl a bemused look, but then felt a chill inside as the remaining members of Satsuki's former Elite Four emerged from behind the building. Inumuta and Sanageyama were all but forcing the much larger Gamagōri out into the open.

Gamagōri… who was dressed in a white suit, with his hair coiffed *just* so and a small bouquet of flowers in his hand, blushing like a schoolgirl. Looking as though he'd rather be facing an army of life fiber drones than be within ten miles of here right now, he was eventually half-pushed and half-dragged to stand before the trio of girls.

"Ma- Matoi," he nodded stiffly, before turning to Mako. "Ma-Mankanshoku…"

Ryūko felt the world grinding to a halt all around her as she realized what was about to happen. The rumors about Gamagōri's crush on Mako had been anything but secret in the days following the fall of Honnōji, with only Mako herself seeming to be oblivious to them.

He was going to *confess* . To *Mako* . *While she was on a date with Ryūko* .

"Oh, just get on with it already!" Nonon shouted, throwing her hands up in the air.

After shooting a baleful look at Nonon over his shoulder, Gamagōri turned once more to the three women standing before him. He took a deep breath, his thick fingers nearly crushing the bouquet he carried, and then with great ceremony, he knelt.

In front of *Satsuki* .

"Satsuki-sama," he said with difficulty, holding out the flowers. "Please… accept these."

"Gamagōri..?" Satsuki whispered, looking more shocked than any of them.

"My lady," Gamagōri went on, "for years I served as your impenetrable shield, but I have come to realize that it was not merely out of a sense of duty. Now that the war is over, I have come to realize… that I have always had… very strong feelings for you as

well, as unworthy of them as I may be. Whether or not you could ever accept these, I could no longer keep them to myself. Satsuki-sama… I…"

There was a long pause, and Inumuta held out one hand to Sanageyama. "Told you he wouldn't make it. Pay up."

"Give him time, give him time," Sanageyama smirked.

"Oh, for the love of cheese," Nonon hissed. "What Mister I-Pass-Out-At-The-Sight-Of-My-Own-Blood is trying to tell you is that he's in love with you!"

" *JAKUZURE!"* Gamagōri bellowed, rounding on the pink-haired girl.

"That didn't count," Inumuta said to Sanageyama. "He didn't say it himself."

"Enough," Satsuki said. She spoke quietly, but that one word was enough to stop the Elite Four in their tracks. She then looked at Ryūko and Mako and smiled. "If you will pardon me for a time?"

"Uh… sure?" Ryūko said, still completely flummoxed. She looked at Mako, and was surprised to see the other girl biting her lip as though trying to stop herself from bursting into happy tears.

Satsuki held out her hand to her former enforcer. "Gamagōri… Ira… walk with me, please." Her gaze then swept over the other three. "I trust you will give us space? No surveillance, or use of enhanced senses?"

"Wouldn't dream of it, Satsuki-sama," Inumuta smiled ingratiatingly as he slipped his tablet computer into his back pocket.

"Enhanced senses?" Sanageyama asked. "What enhanced senses? I don't think I heard you correctly."

"Oh, come *on*," Nonon said, her face the very picture of exasperation. "Let's give frog-boy his chance and let the slacker and

the transfer student get back to their date." She then shooed the two boys off, following close behind them. "Call me later, Satsuki-chan?"

Just like that, Ryūko and Mako were alone, with Satsuki and Gamagōri going one way and the remainder of the Elite Four going the other. "What the hell just happened?" Ryūko asked.

"I guess Gamagōri-senpai finally worked up his nerve!" Mako beamed. "Wasn't it romantic?"

"Well… yeah, if you're into that kind of melodramatic confession," Ryūko considered, scratching her jaw idly. "But… what the hell did I miss while I was gone? I thought *you* were the one he had a thing for." For a moment, she nearly told Mako about the occasional nightmares she'd had on the road, where Gamagōri had swooped in during her absence and claimed Mako for his own, leaving Ryūko hiding behind a false smile as the Maid of Honor at their wedding.

"Oh, well, I think he did for a while," Mako explained as they resumed their walk. "In fact, he and I actually went out together a couple of times while you were away."

Ryūko nearly choked at the casual way in which Mako said this. "You *what?!* "

"Well, he asked me to have coffee with him one day, and I said sure, because I've been wanting the chance to thank him properly for saving me from the COVERs, and from Crazy Eyepatch Girl. I didn't even realize until I got there that it was kind of intended as a date."

"And what… *happened*… at this date?" Ryūko asked, trying to keep her voice level. She realized that she was clenching and unclenching her fist, and she stuffed the hand into her jacket to hide it.

Mako shrugged. "I spent the entire time talking about you, and he spent the entire time talking about Satsuki-sama. Poor senpai seemed so confused, and that was when he told me that he'd been

struggling with the idea that he had a crush on me, even though he knew that all of his devotion and loyalty was still to Satsuki-sama."

"Oh… really?" Ryūko said carefully.

"He came to see me a couple days later," Mako went on. "That was the day after my surgery, though, so I couldn't really see him while we talked. He actually apologized to me, Ryūko-chan. He said that it wasn't fair to pursue me when he knew that there would always be someone else more important in his life."

"Huh," Ryūko nodded slowly. "That's… actually kind of impressive, in a weird way. I hope he's not setting himself up for disappointment, though. Even a self-admitted masochist doesn't deserve that."

Satsuki led Gamagōri to a large, ornate fountain on the outskirts of the shopping district, then sat at its edge and patted the spot next to her. "Sit with me, please."

"Of course, my lady," the large man said roughly. He then rather gingerly lowered himself to the stone rim beside her.

"Ira…" she said carefully, "you have both flattered me and placed me in an awkward position, I'm afraid."

"You need not be concerned, Satsuki-sama," he ground out. "I am prepared for your rejection, and it will in no way affect my loyalty to you and your causes."

"And I am glad to know this," she assured him. "But you ask something of me which I cannot, at the current time, answer truthfully. I can neither accept nor reject your affections, Ira. I have lived my life for one cause, and one cause only. Now that I have accomplished my goals… in many ways, I am adrift."

Here, he finally turned to face her. "What can I do to help you, my lady?"

"You may be patient with me as I try to discover who I am," Satsuki smiled softly. "I find now that I never truly expected to survive this conflict, and as a consequence, I am at a loss. Who is Kiryūin Satsuki? What does her heart whisper to her now that she can actually hear it?"

Gamagōri nodded slowly, then looked away. "Forgive me for what I am about to ask, Satsuki-sama, but… you have become very close to Mankanshoku. Does she… speak to your heart?"

"She quiets the screaming in my mind, and allows me to listen for those whispers," Satsuki explained. "My feelings for Mankanshoku are… complicated. She has been a great comfort to me in the time since my mother's death. She has held me while I've cried, cheered me with her stories when I felt closest to despair, and asked nothing of me in return. Forgive me, Ira, but in some ways it was easier to be vulnerable in front of her than it would have been with you, or Nonon, or any of the others. My pride… my damned pride would not allow me to be anything but strong for you, my closest companions."

"I… believe I understand," Gamagōri said then. "Though… I swear to you, Satsuki-sama: I would guard your every secret, your every tear, and your every vulnerability as fiercely as I have guarded your life."

"I know you would, Ira. And… perhaps one day I will be ready for that as well. For now, I must continue listening and hoping that the whispers from my heart will become easier to hear in time."

"I am willing to wait for that possibility," Gamagōri said, actually giving the tiniest hint of a smile. "I waited for you once before, my lady. I am prepared to wait again."

"I am grateful," Satsuki said, bowing her head. "Only promise me, Ira… that you will not wait forever. If, in the end, I can never give you what you seek… you must not waste your life pining for me. Promise me this, Ira, please."

"My lady," Gamagōri replied, and now there was definitely a tiny smile on his hard face, "I am afraid that you ask something of me which I cannot, at the current time, answer truthfully."

"Very well, my steadfast shield," Satsuki chuckled. "Let us then see what the future will bring."

Shopping ended quietly, with Satsuki seemingly lost in thought, Ryūko the same, and Mako recognizing that this time it was probably for the best to let them be. Eventually, though, it was time to go home for dinner, so Mako and Satsuki led Ryūko to what was to be her new home for the foreseeable future.

It was a gorgeous two-story house situated on the steep hillside leading up from the bay, and as promised, Ryūko had her own spacious bedroom with a breathtaking view out across the water. Mako's room was right next door, with a third "guest" room further down the hall (though according to Mako, this one had already been designated "Satsuki's room" due to her frequent visits), while Mataro and Mako's parents had their rooms on the ground floor.

Ryūko's homecoming dinner was, unsurprisingly, croquettes, though like the ones they had shared in one-star housing, these were actually made with recognizable meat. It was a bit of a change to be back to crazy family meals after her recent isolation, but Ryūko loved every moment of it, and could not deny that it felt wonderful to be back with *her* family again.

That evening, though, Ryūko found herself lying awake in bed, her mind still spinning. Given that she had few possessions at the best of times, the room was rather sparse and barren, even though Mako had tried to add some cheer in the form of some stuffed animals and cute throw rugs. It felt strange to have a bed of her own again, and it was almost *too* comfortable to sleep.

"Ryūko-chan?" Mako whispered from beside her.

Ryūko looked at the head of brown hair nestled against her chest and smiled. "What is it, Mako?" she whispered in reply.

"What happened today, near the end of shopping? You suddenly got really quiet."

"Nothing to worry about," Ryūko assured her. "I just… saw a kid wearing a *seifuku*, and… the colors of it kind of reminded me of Senketsu. That's all."

"Oh," Mako said quietly. "You… miss him, don't you?"

"Every day."

"Me too. Do you ever… wonder if..?"

"Every day," Ryūko said again. "There were times when I was away that I just… kept calling to him, in my mind, hoping that there might be some fragment of him still listening, but…"

"I'm so sorry, Ryūko-chan," Mako whispered, turning her head to kiss Ryūko on the collarbone.

"I will always honor his memory," said Satsuki from opposite Mako.

Ryūko grimaced. "Sorry, nee-san. Didn't mean to wake you."

"I was not asleep," Satsuki said, opening her eyes to peer at them through the darkness. "But I meant what I said. On that final day, he shared himself with each one of us, and in so doing, allowed our blood to flow as one. He gave us a gift far more wonderful than I could ever have imagined: he gave us *one another* . I shall thank Senketsu each and every day of my life for the bond he formed between the three of us. *That* is how I shall choose to honor his memory."

"Not too shabby, nee-san," Ryūko said, using the blasé words to mask the lump in her throat.

"Satsuki-sama always says awesome things," Mako grinned sleepily. "In that case, thank you, Senketsu-chan, for making me the luckiest girl in the world." She snuggled in closer to Ryūko, then somehow reached back to pull Satsuki into the cuddle as well.

"I guess there are worse fates than being stuck with the two of you," Ryūko said, trying her hardest to keep up her usual semi-sarcastic tone.

And then Mako ruined it for her. "Love you, Ryūko-chan."

Silence filled the room as Ryūko found that she didn't trust herself to speak without her voice cracking.

"It is customary at this point to say something to return the-" Satsuki began.

"I know, I know," Ryūko groused. She then planted a kiss in that mess of brown hair and tightened her arm around this insane girl who had found a home in her heart. "I love you too, Mako."

With nothing more to be said, Satsuki once again closed her eyes and settled against her pillow, while Mako dropped off to sleep with her normal celerity.

Ryūko took this chance to again look at the two women beside her: a sister she had never known, and a friend to share her life through every joy and trial. The war had not ended without loss, but in the end, she had been very lucky indeed.

Thanks, Senketsu…

.

The End

"Underground" by R.A. Fletcher (Suzume CA)

14 February - 28 March 2014

This story is dedicated to the Ryumako gang on tumblr (you know who you are). We survived the finale! *Hallelujah!*